

ABRAHAM'S
SACRIFICE
BY
GUSTAF
JANSON

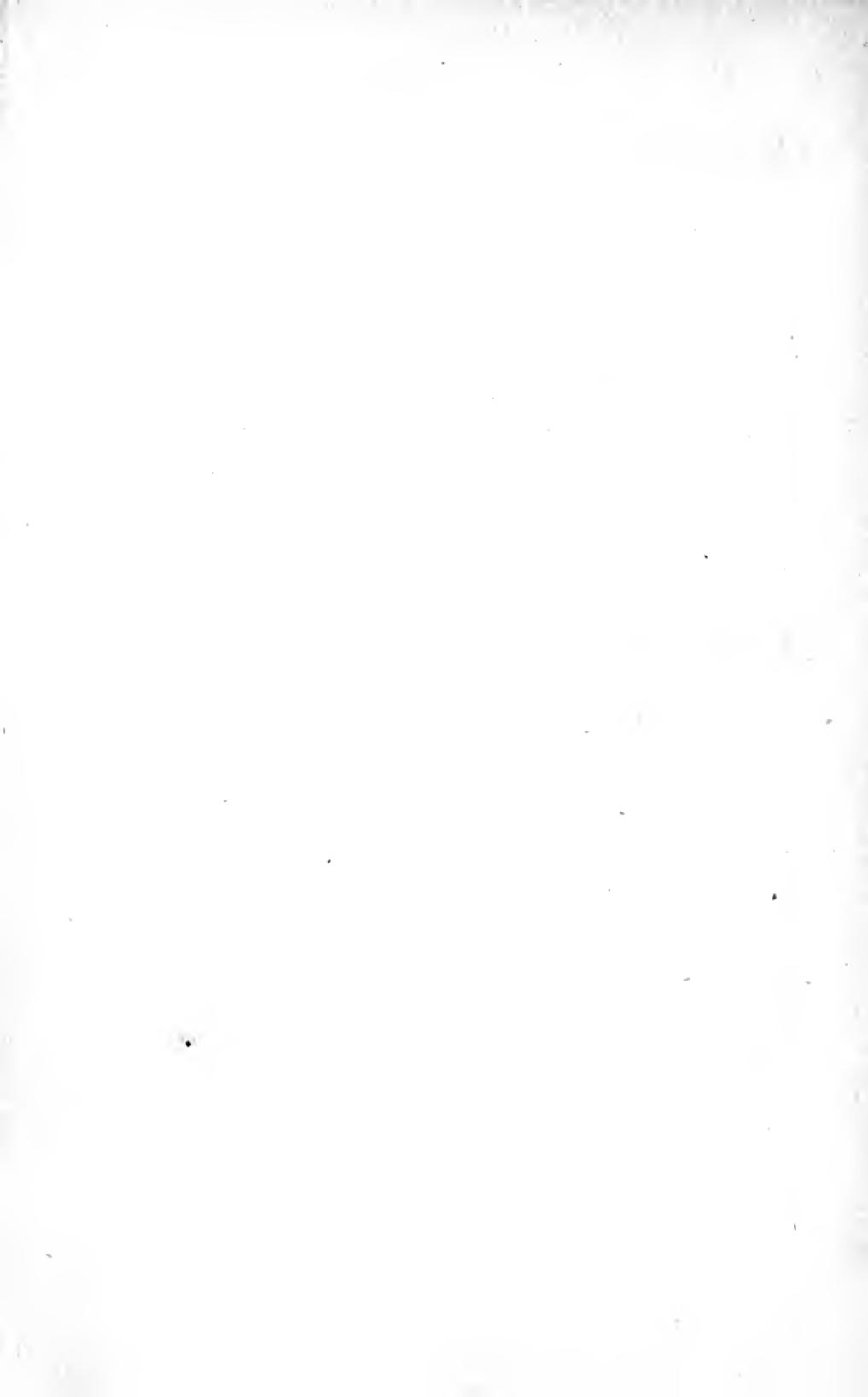
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BY

GUSTAF JANSON

AUTHORISED TRANSLATION FROM THE SWEDISH

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ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE

PART I

CHAPTER I

A PAGE OF THE REGIMENT'S HISTORY

THE sun was about to set, and twilight was creeping slowly over the plain. Far away to the north the horizon was bounded by a number of small hills, behind which night seemed to lie in ambush, as if prepared at any moment to envelop everything in its dark, impenetrable veil.

Over the weary veldt, which seemed equally without beginning and without end, came a troop of mounted dragoons. There were just fifteen of them ; and although all urged and spurred their horses to the uttermost, the animals went only at a foot-pace, their heads drooping to the ground. Two officers, neither of whom was more than thirty years old, rode a few yards in advance of the men, in whose somewhat disordered ranks a sullen silence prevailed. The men's bearing showed that they were tired out, and their faces indicated that bitter vexation was at work within their breasts.

They had now had a spell of three days in the saddle, and the annoying part of it was that their reconnoitring expedition had been entirely without result. They had borne the full heat of the midday sun, and the rigour of the frosts by night ; they had thirsted long hours at a stretch, and now they were as hungry as wolves into the bargain,

for their three days' rations had come to an end that morning. They had no definite idea of their whereabouts, but imagined that they could not well be more than twenty miles from their headquarters.

Wherever they had searched for their mobile enemy during these three days they had seen nothing of him, although only yesterday they had had a strong suspicion that the Boers were in the neighbourhood, following them and watching their movements. At noon they had crossed a small stream, and had seen close by the fresh tracks of over a hundred horses. But as yet not one of them had had so much as a glimpse of a Boer. Their excessive fatigue prevented them from ascertaining the significance of what they had observed. They longed too much for rest to be moved by any apprehension of impending danger. But the troopers were furious that they should be obliged to fumble aimlessly about in such a fashion without ever knowing what the next moment might bring.

Four months ago they had landed at Cape Town, fully convinced that they were about to enjoy an excellent holiday. Rumours, one contradicting another, met them on their arrival, and there were not wanting prophets of evil ready to shatter their pleasant dreams of magnificent cavalry charges and of battles won. But the lads of Her Majesty's 19th Irish Dragoons took no notice of such foolish talk, but lightheartedly took the day as it came.

The regiment had then been packed into a train and carried through a country in which not a man felt the slightest interest. For two days the panting engine bore them along past well-kept farms, rushing into black tunnels that pierced precipitous hills, or creeping slowly across bridges whose height made one dizzy. Once it happened that the train made a longer stop than usual, and presently the news that the rails had been torn up a mile or two farther on passed like wildfire from man to man. Then the 19th Irish Dragoons swore loudly and long that the cursed Boers should pay dearly for the mischief they had done. The Boers, however, kept discreetly in the background, and the story of the torn-up rails proved to be

part of a pack of lies told by some over-imaginative Kaffir. The outcome of this stoppage was the division of the train into three portions, two squadrons being sent on in front, as it was deemed wise to risk them in order to ensure the safety of the rest.

Again the long train steamed onward until one day it came to a standstill at a river, the bridge across which had been blown up.

“What's to be done now?” was the question that passed from man to man.

It was decided that they should encamp and wait. The horses were in a miserable state, and every man swore as he thought of the brilliant parades at home. All now settled down in peace to a well-earned rest, while the horses were turned out to seek for fodder. Every other day the untiring train brought up a fresh detachment, and when a week had passed, the whole regiment had arrived, the colonel declaring that they were now perfectly ready for action.

When the dragoons reached the river, the name of which was unknown to them, they had found 3000 infantry already on the spot. When they had waited yet another week it was said that the division numbered 6000 men. The horses still hung their heads and stumbled at exercise. But every man knew well that they had not come there merely to put 800 stiff-legged horses through their paces, but to help their Queen to gain a brilliant victory. And so the colonel spoke nothing but the truth when he declared that the whole regiment was burning with the desire to begin fighting.

Meanwhile the army amused itself by gazing across at the opposite bank of the river, where the enemy was supposed to be. Every day the sun shone as brightly and warmly as ever; every night the darkness was equally dense, while the cold seemed to grow more and more biting; but neither a shot nor a movement betokened that a single human being was in hiding on the other side. When they had waited another fortnight in the hope of discovering something, the whole force began to joke and

make merry over the business. Those Boers, they said, must surely exist only in the imagination of the authorities.

It seemed as if the confidence of the soldiers—which was born of equal parts of discontent and foolhardiness—had infected even the officers. When another week of deliberation had passed, and when the trains had transported yet another couple of khaki-clad infantry regiments to the river's southern bank, the order was given to prepare for the attack. That night the army slept better than ever, and at daybreak all were ready with fresh courage to set to work.

The 19th Irish Dragoons had been roused in the middle of the night and sent out to meet an expected flank attack. The soldiers laughed, and the officers shrugged their shoulders with vexation at the circumstantial nature of their orders. If there was fighting to be done, they would fight, and that was enough for them; and so, lightly and unconcernedly, the whole regiment went forth towards its unknown goal. After several hours' riding over ground that greatly tried the strength of their horses, they dismounted, while patrols were sent out in every direction. Strange though it may seem, every man now felt somewhat uneasy, and every eye was turned intently towards the north. The river was no longer in sight, and not a sound was to be heard. There was nothing for them to do but wait, and to this they were by now tolerably well inured.

It was about an hour after sunrise when suddenly the roar of cannon was heard behind them. The men turned to the right about, and anxiously strained their eyes to the utmost. After a quarter of an hour had passed, all had become accustomed to the detonations, and yet their nervous excitement had increased. The Boers, however, were really on the other side of the river, and when this was apparent the whole regiment gave a sigh of relief, for it had seemed for a moment as if they had been trapped into something that might have proved anything but a joke.

About half an hour after the cannonade had begun, the enemy opened rifle fire. The din was now infernal, like nothing that anyone had ever heard before. The gruff base

of the big guns was scarcely able to drown the sharper clatter of the Maxims and the rifles. At this distance the noise was like the incessant clangour of great bars of iron, rumbling and thundering, bellowing and clamouring, until the drums of one's ears threatened to burst. For a few moments there was a lull, broken only by a few rifle shots, which came as a relief to the men's tortured ears ; then came the harsh rattle of half a dozen Maxims, rending the air like the wailing of lost souls in an inferno. Next moment the cannon again sent forth their terrible missiles, and the very heavens seemed about to fall. The tumult became deafening ; every imaginable sound contributed to the universal uproar. The big guns thundered louder and louder, the Maxims sang their unintermittent melody, the rifle shots fell so thick and fast that hundreds must have been fired every moment.

The 19th Irish Dragoons were furious, without rightly knowing why. They were soon able to distinguish the Boer guns from those of their own division. Their own were nearer, and could be heard more plainly, but although they hurled their shower of projectiles across the river with unremitting zeal, the enemy's fire showed no sign of slackening. At times the Boer fire even seemed to predominate, and then the dragoons stamped their feet and swore so loudly that the colonel was at length obliged to give the order—

“Silence in the ranks !”

But the dragoons swore none the less for that ; their swearing was only somewhat more subdued. For two weird hours everything remained precisely the same. Meanwhile the irritation of the men had risen to such a pitch that the colonel had sanctioned the advance of a squadron on foot to the river-bank, with orders to open an effective fire on the enemy.

The squadron rushed down to the bank, followed by the envious looks of those left behind.

For fifteen minutes the men lay flat on the ground among the stubble, and fired, one after another, an indefinite number of shots across the river, although, in

spite of all their watching, they could not discern a single human being on the opposite bank. Presently a brilliant idea struck one of the majors. Turning to the colonel, he suggested that the regiment should ford the river in order to make a flank movement against the enemy.

"There doesn't seem to be a soul over there," the major added in a whisper.

All the officers thought the proposal excellent, and even the colonel shared their opinion, although he dared not undertake such an important movement without orders. He decided, however, that he ought to despatch an adjutant with the proposal to the general; so, from a dozen eager lieutenants he chose one who happened to be in his good graces for the moment, whereupon the favoured one joyfully galloped away.

Half a mile from the spot where the Irish Dragoons stood stamping their feet as if possessed, the lieutenant came unexpectedly upon a group of infantry officers behind a kopje.

"Have you seen them? How many of them do you think there are? We heard your fire—are you getting on all right over there?" These and many other questions were showered upon him.

Although the adjutant was tolerably certain that there was nothing very great in the way of an enemy in front of his regiment, he answered unblushingly—

"However many of them there may be, we have made it hot for them!"

With this answer, which they might interpret as they chose, he rode on, while a fat major behind him muttered—

"These newcomers are always so confoundedly lucky! Here are we, twelve hundred of us, with our noses in the dust, and not a Boer to be seen—not one! It's beastly! it's mean! And then, to make things worse, those cursed cavalry fellows get themselves into the thick of the fire, while we—the best regiment in the army—don't get even the chance to fire a shot!"

"It's outrageous!" said the superior officer nearest him, with great solemnity.

The lieutenant tried to whistle a few bars of the latest musical comedy as he spurred his horse in order to get away as quickly as possible from the envy of those common infantry fellows, but even his ear—not over-musical at the best—told him that he was not in the fittest humour for it. So he listened instead to the noise of the cannon in front of him. To his astonishment, it was the guns on the north bank of the river that predominated ; the British artillery now answered, as if aimlessly, at painfully long intervals. He had a strong suspicion that there was something wrong, and at the thought he caught his breath. But immediately he dismissed his apprehension as unworthy of a British officer. He stroked his moustache, gathered up his reins, drew himself up in his saddle, and rode on until he encountered a staff officer, who came dashing towards him.

“Retire !” shouted the staff officer.

The lieutenant could not believe his ears.

“Retire along the whole line !” thundered the other.

It could scarcely be said that the lieutenant looked surprised. He sat with his right hand raised as if it were riveted to his helmet, while his lower jaw fell.

“Two hundred killed—three times as many wounded,” said the staff officer, as if he were repeating some very difficult lesson. Then he added—

“I must request you to return to your regiment, sir.”

“But I was to propose to the general in command”—

The other waved his hand in a parting salute, and galloped swiftly away.

“But I was to pro—”

The lieutenant got no further. Presently his face assumed its normal expression, and with an utter disregard of regulation deportment, he rode back the way he had come.

It would be impossible to give an adequate idea of the language used by the 19th Irish when they mounted their horses for the second time that day. The regiment retired, and pitched their camp on exactly the same spot where they had stood before. If the gun and rifle fire had not been heard by 8000 men, and if there had been

no dead and wounded, it might well have been thought that nothing out of the common had happened. Unfortunately, there was too much evidence at hand that a battle had been fought beside that unknown river—a battle, moreover, that had been lost.

And the Boers? No one had seen any. The artillery and those regiments that had lost most men only knew that an incredible quantity of shot of every kind had been showered down upon them, that men and horses had fallen on every side, and that with parched throats and beating hearts they had retired backwards when they should have been dashing forward.

A solemn stillness lay over the whole army. And now began a series of small reverses, such as generally follow upon a big one. The enemy was nowhere, yet everywhere, and no one seemed able to discover him. Patrols were captured in broad daylight, and the railway line that brought provisions and reinforcements to the camp was torn up fifteen miles to the south, so that for two days the troops had to starve. A little later things went on pretty much as before the reverse, except for one trifling difference. If for any reason a man ventured beyond a certain invisible line that might have been described about the camp, he seldom returned with a whole skin, if he returned at all. The aggravating part of it was that no one knew exactly where the line should be drawn. Disquieting stories passed from man to man of venerable old Boers who lay half-buried in the ground, smoking their pipes or chewing their tough biltong, and who amused themselves between every whiff or mouthful by shooting at Her Majesty's soldiers. Every day something would happen to excite the men's imaginations. Although no one was conscious of anything like fear, yet about this sort of warfare, which set all settled principles at defiance, there was, to put it mildly, something very strange, the strangest thing of all being the fact that the enemy remained invisible. Of the 8000 men who had been concentrated there in so short a time, not one could boast of having looked a Boer in the face. Two fellows who were bold enough to assert

that they had really seen one were mercilessly laughed at by their comrades.

Thus a month passed away. The telegraph worked incessantly; telegrams were sent off and received daily, but nothing important happened. There was nothing out of the ordinary. This meant that at roll-call every day the sergeants had to reply with the inevitable "wounded" or "missing." Every regiment saw its numbers reduced in the course of the twenty-four hours, and the horses died off like flies in autumn. The dragoons asked each other, not without concern, what would be the end of it all. At the muster held at home before they embarked, they had seemed such a splendid lot of fellows that the sight of them would have brought tears of joy to the eyes of the most inveterate of peace-lovers. And now, within six months of that proud moment of its history, the regiment had become a troop of dirty, unshaven tatterdemalions, mounted upon such wretched jades that it was a disgrace to put them to any work whatever. In a still worse state were the other cavalry regiments; and as for the infantry, with their swollen feet and their general air of limpness, the less said about them the better.

The only diversion of the Irish Dragoons consisted in what the staff despatches termed "safeguarding the communications." At first they laughed not a little over this oft-repeated phrase, but after their two days' starvation they began to realise its practical importance. It was in the following manner that the safeguarding in question was accomplished. In small detachments the regiment scoured up and down the railway line, in order to prevent the enemy from tearing up the sleepers and throwing the rails down the embankment in a heap. This patrolling brought them neither honour nor thanks, for, should a few young Boers, taking advantage of the dark nights, succeed in stealing through their lines and doing some mischief, reproaches were sure to be showered upon them from headquarters. Then the colonel swore, the officers shouted themselves hoarse, and the men fumed with rage like a swarm of incensed bees.

The regiment now made its sorry muster only once a week. In torn and faded uniforms, on horses whose heads drooped to the ground, the troopers would fall in, while a lieutenant rode along their lines to make out his list of missing. The word "missing" occurred with painful frequency throughout the long list, although killed and wounded were by no means wanting either. In two months the horses had dwindled to half their original number, while in the same time the men had been reduced by one-sixth of their full strength. And still the disheartening patrolling along the railway went on. They rode backwards and forwards mile upon mile, the only visible result being a fresh list of missing.

As if to explain why the methods of warfare hitherto followed must of necessity bring comparatively poor results, it was decided to proclaim the district in a state of rebellion. In this the whole division felt satisfaction, without, however, having any very clear idea as to the changes that might be expected to ensue. This rebellion, which the newspapers at home had already announced as a fact, at length broke out as a result of the military measures that had been instituted. Two squadrons of Lancers fell into an ambush and were destroyed almost to a man; a company of infantry was captured within a couple of miles from the main body; and immediately an English uniform showed itself, bullets rained from every bush.

If things had been uncomfortable before, they now became intolerable. Reinforcements arrived almost daily, but although no battle was fought, and no progress was made, the new arrivals barely sufficed to fill the gaps made by the enemy. It was impossible, even for the most imaginative, to compare this war with any other that had ever been heard of, and this circumstance accounted for an unusual state of irritability that seemed to infect all ranks. The officers used harsh language towards their subordinates, and the men grumbled at the slightest provocation. Their invisible enemy generally took care that they should not lack occasion.

After nine long weeks the hour of release had struck at

last. Orders came for the whole force to break up and concentrate at a certain point. Just as the movement had been begun, a piece of news arrived and spread like wildfire from rank to rank and from man to man. The officers smiled and whispered to each other ; the soldiers put their heads together and chuckled. Then the whole force broke into a great cheer that rent the air. Cronje, the lion of Africa, had been captured. Away to the north a great victory had been won. Hence the "Hurrahs!" for the Queen and for "old Bobs." At that moment the smallest drummer-boy felt himself capable of any deed of daring ; the lust of battle shone in every eye. The regiments could hardly be got to wait for orders, so anxious were they to advance once more towards the cursed river on whose banks so many of their comrades had fallen. The sort of nervous irritability excited by their unseen enemy now completely vanished, and it was with confidence that they marched forward to the victory which all had sworn to win.

Two of the infantry regiments were the first to reach the southern bank. Not a movement or a shot betrayed the presence of the enemy on the other side, but all felt certain that the enemy was there. For a moment they held their breath and waited. Still there was nothing but the same solemn stillness. The sun shone resplendent in the cloudless sky ; everything around seemed to breathe of life and joy, inviting them to lightheartedness and laughter ; yet here only danger and suffering lurked for them. What might not the next moment bring ? How many of them would come out of this alive ? Pshaw ! Were not they proud Albion's own sons ? Fear they could not know ; and so, with eyes blinded and ears that did not hear, they strode onward.

With craned necks the gunners stood by their Maxims and field-guns, straining every nerve to see or hear something of the enemy. But as the enemy seemed to persist in his concealment, they at length lost patience and opened the ball on their own account.

This was just what the attacking column needed. The

crash of the firing acted upon them like an intoxicant ; their parched throats moistened, and the foremost men dashed even more eagerly across the river. To delay or hesitate was to be lost. Their business was to go on—to kill, to conquer. At the deepest part the water scarcely reached their shoulders. Still there was nothing—nothing ! They climbed up the north bank, but still not a shot was fired upon them. No doubt their invisible foe had some fresh surprise in store for them.

With a loud, ringing cheer from two thousand throats, the two khaki-clad regiments stormed up the slope, leaving a broad wet path behind them.

Before five minutes had passed they began to realise that they had taken a position that had been evacuated by the enemy two days before. Soldiers and officers gazed stupidly at each other, shook their heads, and confessed that they could make nothing of such a war, so unlike any campaign they had ever heard of. When their first feeling of disappointment had passed, they held their tongues about the adventure, though about their silence there was something sulky and shamefaced.

Two pontoon bridges were hastily thrown across the river, and the first to pass were the 19th Irish Dragoons, each man holding his horse by the bridle and letting it swim across beside him. On the farther side they formed and climbed the hills to safeguard the crossing of the rest of the division. Their first business was to send out scouts to ascertain the whereabouts of the enemy, for their suspicions of the immediate proximity of the capricious Boers were still very strong. With a resounding cheer they gained the summit ; they then descended into a small valley and climbed the slope beyond, to deploy later on an extensive plain. Here they halted, and looked suspiciously about them, but nowhere on the grassy waste was any sign of the enemy's presence to be seen.

Suddenly, however, one of the troopers exclaimed—

“ Look ! . . . Just look there ! ”

It was needless to say more, for all had seen. Two, perhaps three, miles away—for the clearness of the atmo-

sphere made it difficult to judge the distance—they saw on the opposite slope a group of people sharply defined against the lighter background. There might have been about fifty of them, but, few or many, they could not well have escaped discovery. It did not seem to be their intention to hide, for there they stood immovable, their rifles at their feet, gazing calmly over at their advancing foes.

"At last!" muttered the men, and six hundred hearts beat faster at the thought. No sooner was the word of command uttered, than, utterly regardless of consequences, each man grasped his reins, drew his sword, and fiercely spurred his horse. Like a flash of lightning, the regiment dashed down and across the plain. There was now no time for cheering; every man bit his lips, and turned his burning eyes towards the spot where his hated enemy had just been seen. Like a moving avalanche the whole force rushed on, all, from the colonel to the youngest recruit, stirred by the same fierce impulse. The snorting of horses, the clanging of scabbards and stirrups, and the clatter of hoofs upon the ground, made a confused medley that sounded pleasantly in the ears of the hardened trooper, acting like an exhilarating charm upon the spirits of both men and animals.

It soon appeared that the plain extended farther than the dragoons had imagined, and that its grass grew only in solitary tufts. Thus, in an incredibly short time, the regiment was enveloped in an impenetrable cloud of dust. The men coughed and spat, and beneath the heat of the sun, which made their helmets feel heavy as lead, their ardour began to wane. Although for a quarter of an hour they had advanced at a great pace, the kopje which was their goal seemed as far off as ever.

Although the regiment had started in something like military order, it was not long before its ranks became contracted into a sort of knot; at length, however, this unloosened, and, stretching out, assumed the form of an intricate tangle. Instead of being a charge, the attack soon developed into a disorderly scamper. Although blinded by the dust, the officers quite realised that everything had gone to pieces; but every one knew what the

honour of the regiment demanded, and no one thought of slackening his pace. The best horses managed to hold out, the foot-sore and the weak-kneed lagged behind, so that the whole body presented a most curious spectacle. In small scattered groups, sometimes one by one, the dragoons reached the objective of their wild onset, only to find—nothing! Swaying in their saddles, they wiped their sweating faces, cleared the dust from their parched throats, and it was some little time before they could regain sufficient self-command to curse their usual luck.

Before them stretched the boundless veldt once more, and although they strained their eyes anxiously, not a single living creature could they discern—except, indeed, a couple of hungry vultures feeding on a dead horse about a mile away.

The bugle summoned them into something like order. Behind the regiment about a score of men busied themselves with their broken-down horses; a few injured collar-bones and one or two sprained ankles made up the casualty list. All their exertions had been in vain, and all ranks were oppressed with a feeling of disgust.

Meanwhile, the general in command had got half his army safely across the river, and presently an adjutant arrived with orders for the dragoons to proceed still farther. When the regiment got beyond the hills, however, and out of sight of the main body, it came to a forced halt, for the horses simply refused to go another step. About thirty of them were utterly unfit for further work, and at least a hundred more would not be able to use their legs for several days. But to question their orders was impossible. So the disabled horses were formed into a rear-guard, such as it was, while the rest pushed onward as best they might.

For a fortnight the Irish Dragoons knocked about the waterless veldt. The honour of being the vanguard had cost them about fifty men killed or missing, without counting the wounded and the loss of half their horses. When the news came that the enemy's capital had been taken, there were scarcely 300 horses left fit for action, so the regiment could well feel that they had borne their part in

the work. That evening there was much jubilation in camp, but there were some who could not help speculating what they would look like when all was over.

From time to time they were able to report that they had been in touch with the enemy, for on occasion they were really conscious of his presence, although they had never been lucky enough to meet him at close quarters. Every night, however, they petitioned Providence and other powers quite touchingly that this might happen. As they felt that they must blame something for their misadventures, they blamed the climate, which so sapped the horses' strength—a plausible excuse, certainly, for every cavalry regiment was in the same sad case as themselves.

"The climate?" muttered Pat O'Toole doubtfully, when this explanation was put forward for the first time.

"Yes, the climate," answered the sergeant of the squadron.

And Pat, who enjoyed the reputation of being the duffer of the regiment, was heard to swear by all he held dear that he would not fail to flay the rascal alive if ever he should meet him. But poor Pat never got an opportunity to execute his threat, for he was shot down by one of the enemy's bullets while out on patrol, and one more horse was made available for service. His comrades often talked of Pat's method of treating the climate, and all agreed in wishing that he might have had his way, so that they themselves might have had a change for the better.

For the rest, things went on very much as they always do in modern warfare. A hundred thousand men succeeded little by little in subduing ten thousand, so that one fine day the army found all quiet about them as they marched from the south towards the already occupied capital. In fact, within a circuit of about five miles from the main body the country was perfectly safe. A mountain pass could now be approached with confidence, and it was no longer necessary to bombard every kopje before nearing it. A proclamation of the Commander-in-Chief declared the country to the south of Bloemfontein to be occupied, and the inhabitants were ordered to return to their farms. Most

of them did so, but as the British army marched past, the faces of the people were not of the friendliest.

The army, of which the Irish Dragoons formed a not unimportant section, was not a little annoyed at this hostile behaviour, and especially at the looks of hatred cast at invaders by the women. The conquerors had expected a somewhat friendlier reception, but, in spite of every overture designed to bring about a little innocent flirtation, the rather ponderous Boer beauties chose to accentuate, if possible, their preference for the men of their own race.

The dragoons now ceased to trouble themselves about events farther south. They sought and found comfort in the thought that they were only a couple of miles from Bloemfontein, and in anticipating the fine times in store for them there. Then came the news that their work of laying waste the country had been attended by an unexpected, though quite natural, result: that the district behind them was in full revolt, and that the newly organised communications were threatened. And so they had once more to roam in all directions about the great veldt of the Orange Free State, and as they had not taken any account of the enemy's tough nature and his newly awakened bitterness, they met with all sorts of difficulties, which, moreover, increased day by day. Hundreds of horses became unfit for use, and remounts became broken-winded at the end of a week, so that the Irish Dragoons soon numbered more dismounted than mounted men.

At length there came one great day for the dragoons. The division to which they now belonged—they hardly knew to which division they did belong, because of their many changes—came unexpectedly upon the enemy, who seemed determined to fight.

The battle was like many another during the war. After an hour's artillery duel, the Boers suddenly evacuated their position and retired a couple of miles behind it. The British followed them up like well-trained hounds, and again the artillery began to thunder forth from their positions. Then came a cleverly conducted and courageous

charge by a Highland regiment, and the enemy was again driven from his position.

To the Irish Dragoons and the Lancers fell the honour of following up the victory. Forming hastily, they dashed forward with loosened rein as twilight was spreading over the battlefield. At full gallop they rushed across the veldt to the enemy's trenches, first skirting them in extended order and then closing up in such fine style that the infantry lying on the ground stared at them in admiration. Still the great thundering mass pressed onward, their swords blazing in the last beams of the setting sun.

Suddenly they came to an unexpected halt. A puff of hot smoke came full in their faces, and a continuous stream of lead and other projectiles was showered over both Lancers and dragoons, exploding now at their sides, now over their heads, now under their horses' feet. Some were blown from their saddles into the air, clutching wildly for support with their hands, only to drop mangled to the ground ; terror-stricken horses reared and stamped ; others, that had had their bellies rent open by the shells, got their legs entangled with their own entrails, disembowelling themselves as they took to flight. Limbs were broken and crushed, and men, still warm with life, were trampled to the ground. The earth trembled, and the heavens were darkened as if with a veil of mourning ; the agonised groans of the wounded, the death-rattle of the dying, the curses, the prayers, and the hoarse cheers, formed a ghastly chorus almost intolerable to human ears. The centre ranks of the cavalry were crushed into a shapeless, bleeding mass ; men, alive but seemingly delirious, could be seen crawling about, mingled with others who were in their death-throes. But, wild with the lust of battle, the rest of the regiment again dashed onward.

That evening's work had cost the dragoons 150 men. The Lancers had not lost quite so many. In return, they had, between them, captured a couple of dismounted field-guns and an ammunition wagon.

From that time the Irish Dragoons could be said to exist only on paper. The men had now dwindled

to half their original number, and there were not enough horses left to form a complete squadron. Most of the men had to be sent in to the field hospitals, and the few troopers who remained were drafted into another regiment that was sent to join the main body at the front. Here, it was thought, their experience of guerilla warfare could not but stand them in good stead.

And in truth they were made good use of. In uniforms tattered enough for a ragpicker to despise, they sweated by day and shivered by night. In their everlasting patrol-work they made a record, fighting early and late, hungering often, ever at hand when there was any chance either of giving or receiving a thrashing. They had grown hardened and weather-beaten, though their hardships had in nowise sweetened their tempers. They laughed at danger and made light of death, for they had been put to the most risky of reconnoitring and the most hazardous of escapades, and were now inured to any deed of daring. And yet they had never seen the enemy at close quarters —they no more than others. Still, that they had often enough been in touch with the enemy was plainly to be seen by the gaps in their ranks. Finally, the remnant of the regiment was split up into a few independent patrols and dispersed in all directions.

This, in short, is the history of the 19th Irish Dragoons for half a year.

And now these fifteen men were on their way back from one of their customary expeditions, far removed from their base.

CHAPTER II

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

THE short twilight was over, and darkness spread swiftly over the veldt. The situation would have made most men somewhat uncomfortable, but the fifteen dragoons and their two officers had so often been in far worse predicaments that they saw no reason to feel uneasy merely because of the darkness. What did cause them more than usual apprehension was the almost certain fact that they had been discovered, and were even then, perhaps, followed by a superior force of the enemy. Exhaustion had made them careless, paralysing the action of their brains, and relaxing their muscles to such an extent that they could hardly have lifted a finger in their own defence.

Suddenly one of their horses pricked up its ears and neighed, stretching its head to one side. Its rider started and pulled up. Those who rode behind tightened their reins, and their comrades in front did likewise as soon as they noticed that the others had halted. To the little group the silence seemed, if possible, to become even more intense, and with an uneasiness which their physical and mental state transformed into fear, they asked each other in despondent tones whether it was now that they were to meet their invisible foe at last. The answer seemed to be the secret of the surrounding night; their situation was, indeed, so doubtful that it was little wonder if the last shred of resisting power forsook them. The very futility of further groping about in the dark was, however, some consolation to them, for the issue, however desperate it might be, would at least be preferable to this.

The horse neighed again, and two of the troopers imagined that they heard another horse answering in the distance. But when his comrades, to whom he had whispered his suspicions, asked from what direction the sound seemed to come, he could not for the life of him tell whether it was from the right or the left, from the front or the rear. For a moment they all sat motionless, listening; but as nothing further was heard, and no one could positively assert that a horse had really neighed anywhere, the men once more rode on.

For a quarter of an hour they stumbled along through the impenetrable darkness. Presently one of the officers in front reined in his horse, the other following his example. Both leaned forward over their horses' heads and peered into the darkness.

"Didn't it strike you . . . ?" asked the first in a low tone, and then paused hesitatingly.

"What? No, I can see nothing."

"Perhaps it was only my imagination. I haven't felt up to the mark since morning, but"—

"Are you ill, Stephens?"

"Oh no!"

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

Their conversation was exchanged in a whisper, so that it should not be overheard by the men.

Suddenly the officer who had been called Stephens muttered—

"Kennedy, there is something moving over there."

The elder of the officers fired two revolver shots straight into the darkness before him, and shouted—

"Who's there?"

There was no answer, but when the question was repeated with the threat to shoot again, a trembling voice was heard coming from behind some bushes close by!

"Good white Baas,¹ no shoot poor black man!"

"Come here, fellow!"

"No shoot!" whined the voice wretchedly; and the officers fancied they heard the chattering of the creature's teeth.

¹ The name by which the Kaffirs usually address all whites.

“Come here, or we will shoot.”

A shadow seemed almost to rise out of the ground, so close to the horses that they snorted and reared suddenly backwards.

“Keep off!” shouted the officers.

“No shoot poor black man, no shoot!”

The troopers had by this time overtaken the officers, and formed a semicircle round the man, whose form they could only distinguish with great difficulty.

“Where do you come from?” began the elder officer. He spoke in the same muffled tone as before, pointing his revolver straight at the stranger, who, as far as he could make out in the darkness, was really one of the natives.

“Baas officer no angry? No, Baas good—very good.” And the Kaffir came closer, as if wishing to kiss the officer’s feet.

“Don’t dirty my boots with your filthy lips, but answer my question.”

The Kaffir started, and defiantly straightened his humbly bowed back. Then, with his tribe’s native aptitude for changing their mood, he said with malicious glee—

“Baas Van der Nath sends his compliments, and says Baas officer, other officer, and all fifteen soldiers surrender prisoners.”

“What in the devil’s name are you jabbering there? Who’s Van der Nath?”

“Field-cornet his men call him.”

“And where is he?”

The Kaffir had again shrunk down, like a beaten hound before his angry master, and only muttered—

“Soldiers—all fifteen—must surrender.”

“Answer me at once! Where is the field-cornet?”

The Kaffir’s black hand described a great circle in the air before he again raised his voice, in which malice now struggled for the mastery over his evident fear.

“There, and there, and there,” he said. “His men lie on the ground round him—all ready to shoot.”

The two officers turned towards each other and exchanged a significant glance.

"Surrounded," said both in the same breath, with a nod expressive of dejection and annoyance.

The troopers had heard the short conversation with the native who had obstructed their path, and their suppressed exasperation grew apace. But what were they to do? This was like a game of blindman's buff, with all the exits blocked, and death lying in wait for the players. To die bravely, as became the Queen's soldiers—that they could do. And what else? To be shot down like vermin by a carefully hidden foe, to rot away on some unknown spot, to be reported as missing and then to be forgotten—that, alas! was all that remained for them.

"Draw!" shouted the commanding officer, prompted rather by a remembrance that it was his duty to resist to the last than by any real hope of overcoming the threatening danger.

The dragoons obeyed from long habit, but somewhat half-heartedly. The order lacked the triumphant ring to which they had been long accustomed. Swords clanked forth from their scabbards, carbines and revolvers were got ready mechanically, and the patrol tried to imagine that it was ready for action. Their first perplexity was over, and now their nerves, after the momentary stimulus that had succeeded the command, seemed involuntarily to fail them, and it was with undisguised apprehension that they gazed into the pitchy darkness that surrounded them like a wall, scarcely permitting them to distinguish more than the outline of their nearest neighbour. Was it not madness to rush blindly like this against the muzzles of the enemy's rifles? This and many another such question forced themselves irresistibly upon them, and flashed to and fro like lightning in their fifteen overwrought brains. But no answer came from out the night—only that terrible uncertainty which paralysed all action and ate into their minds as if with sharp, relentless fangs. Suddenly one of the men began to sob aloud.

This, then, was the end of it all! In their hunt after their lightfooted foe they had traversed hundreds of miles in an unknown country, passing through countless places

whose names not one of them any longer troubled himself to remember ; they had freely shed their excitable Irish blood, and now they were at last to win the reward of their bravery and hardships. Enfeebled with hunger and stupid with fatigue, they rode on, swaying to and fro like reeds in a strong wind, without the power to form a single clear thought. For several minutes they stopped, waiting in hopeless expectation, conscious only of the fact that their courage was broken and their strength gone.

At this moment a stern voice rang out through the darkness—

“ Surrender !”

It was not a challenge, but rather an imperative command, the self-possessed tone of the speaker indicating clearly that all resistance was hopeless.

The remnant of the Irish Dragoons was not fated to shed its last blood in a desperate fight. All had already realised how futile any attempt at resistance must be. So, with one accord, and without a word, they threw their swords on the ground one after another. Their firearms followed, and then the troopers themselves slowly dismounted, leaving their horses to themselves. Not one of them would have thought twice about fighting an enemy many times stronger than themselves ; but to charge through the darkness with the certain knowledge that it must be unavailing, to stumble over unseen obstacles only to be shot down and perish to no purpose—that was too much even for their often-proved courage.

“ Let your horses go ; form into line—officers in front ! ” continued the hard, stern voice.

The dragoons, broken in spirit, and ready to cry with vexation, obeyed as if in a dream.

A short distance away, yet so near that the prisoners asked themselves in wonder how their presence could have escaped their notice, about a dozen shadowy forms sprang suddenly from the ground. Immediately they heard a loud tramping noise, and saw that their horses were being driven away.

“ They scent comrades,” thought the dragoons. “ They

know where there is fodder and water, or they wouldn't be so ready to go."

They had no opportunity for further reflection, for next moment they were surrounded by some fifty men, whose rifles were held ready for use in case of need. About thirty paces in front of them they suddenly saw the flames of a big fire, in the light of which they could see a number of rifles glistening. Downcast and furious at the thought that they had been made prisoners, they looked the picture of dejection as they approached. It was ghastly to have plunged into such a trap after having spent their strength in trying to find out a path that perhaps did not exist. There was one consolation, though a bitter one: the enemy far outnumbered them. As far as the light extended they could see tethered horses, and their astonishment at having ridden unsuspectingly right into their midst was mingled with a sort of admiration for the enemy's skill, for they were themselves tolerably expert in the artifices of guerilla warfare, and knew how difficult it was to find cover. But, above all, they were possessed by an indescribable feeling of thankfulness, for it would have been the easiest thing in the world for their captors to have shot them all down and then ridden away.

It struck them, too, that while that might have brought them greater glory it would also have entailed far less inconvenience on their foes—no unimportant consideration, in view of the necessity of covering long distances in the shortest possible time. It occurred to them now, moreover, that between them and their enemy, whom they had been accustomed to hate and despise equally, there was one great difference. These Boers, who, they had been told, were almost as uncivilised as savages, had not used their rifles before trying other arguments. They had sent the poor trembling Kaffir to summon them to surrender; perhaps the fellow had himself offered to go on this dangerous errand, for there he now stood beside a cart, showing his teeth, and evidently recounting his achievement to two other Kaffirs. And now that they, who were

the stronger, had made them prisoners, they treated them, not with arrogant harshnesss, but with a certain formal but friendly consideration, almost as if they regretted their captives' reverse of fortune.

Although they did not at once understand it, the Irishmen had an instinctive feeling that here they had encountered a new kind of human being, who with unruffled equanimity carried out his duty of defending the fatherland, however bitter that duty might be.

Without being invited, the dragoons had gone to the fire and squatted in a group around it. Now that the game was up, fatigue asserted its rights ; and although they had now an opportunity of having a good close look at the enemy they had so long sought after, none wished for anything but a morsel of food and a few hours' sleep.

Their thoughts seemed already to have been anticipated, for a man with the traditional Boer beard hanging down his breast came and took from a cart an armful of maize cakes and some pieces of dried meat, and, carrying these to the prisoners, bade them with a friendly nod help themselves.

The dragoons did not need to be asked twice ; they at once set to, their jaws working with an energy and zeal that alone testified how famished they were.

“ Eat away,” said the man who had brought the food, in good English, “ we have enough provisions to feed a whole regiment.”

He then turned round and looked inquiringly at the two officers, who had moved a little distance from their men. He shook his head doubtfully, for their haughty expression made him uncertain of his reception should he address them. At last, taking courage, he asked them timidly—

“ Aren’t you hungry too ? ”

The elder officer merely shrugged his shoulders ; the other met the Boer’s friendly look with a stare.

The man shook his head and smiled, as if he had two self-willed children to deal with, and took no further notice

of their conduct. He then turned once more to the dragoons, and repeated—

“ Eat away ; you must need it.”

Without ceremony, the troopers attacked the simple fare, while he nodded knowingly and muttered something about a fifty-mile ride being likely to give one an excellent appetite. His small, good-natured eyes surveyed them one after another, and at length fixed themselves upon one of them who was too exhausted to eat anything.

“ Yes, yes,” he said ; “ we put no constraint upon you. If you prefer to sleep, do so ; we shall no doubt be here till daybreak.”

And, by way of putting himself on a more familiar footing with the men, he added—

“ We've had our eyes upon you since the morning. We could have taken you when you crossed the little stream at midday, for we were lying in hiding behind the kopje, only three hundred yards away. But we saw that you were in need of food and tired, and so we waited. Everybody knows that one fights badly on an empty stomach and in the dark, and why should we shoot you down when it wasn't necessary? Besides, we have set up a wire fence farther on. If you had gone another half mile your horses would have stumbled into it, and— Well, well ; things are perhaps better as they are.”

The dragoons scarcely listened to what he was saying ; they knew it all before. They merely went on eating. But they felt a sort of satisfaction, inasmuch as the enemy did not show any particular jubilation over their lucky haul, and that they themselves were not made uncomfortable by offensive looks. They could see their horses either lying on the ground or standing in a row chewing their fodder ; now and then a shadow bearing a rifle issued from the darkness on one side of the fire, in a moment to glide into the gloom on the other side and disappear. From time to time the sound of subdued voices reached them, but all that was said was mild and calm in tone, while about everything that was done there was an air of weighty deliberation and assurance. Neither hurry, nor bustle, nor

that military smartness to which they were so accustomed was to be seen here, while the stand-offishness that prevailed between superiors and subordinates in their own ranks seemed to be utterly unknown among this democratic people. All seemed to be on the same footing, friends or equals, and orders were given and taken in the ordinary tones of conversation. Well, and so this was the enemy ! Certainly, things seen at close quarters produced a different impression at a distance.

For the present the troopers were too much fatigued to follow all that happened. One by one they lay down and fell asleep ; all their anxious uncertainty was at an end, and even the enemy's careful sureness about everything had its soothing effect, causing them to close their eyes with as little apprehension as if they had been turning in for the night in their own camp.

There they lay wrapped in their cloaks, their feet turned towards the fire. Out of respect for the two officers, the trooper who lay nearest them did not allow sleep to overpower him, but, following their example, did his best to keep awake. But exhaustion claimed its right even with him. He stretched himself out at full length and made himself as comfortable as possible. In the short interval that still found him between the limits of consciousness and unconsciousness he heard the younger officer remark contemptuously—

“ Those fellows are sleeping like beasts already. Only fill their stomachs and they ask nothing more ! What can one do with such fellows ? ”

The dragoon half-opened his eyes. He suspected that the officers were whispering of the possibility of escape, but, like his comrades, he was too much knocked up to think of anything but rest, and next moment he too slept like a good child, and snored like an Irish Dragoon.

Lieutenant Stephens and Lieutenant Kennedy had taken their place on the ground side by side. They were just as tired and stiff as their men, and soon they fell into a melancholy silence. Their brains no longer obeyed their will, any more than their limbs could have done. They

realised that they must put up with their fate, but they did not take their capture quite so lightly as their men ; the responsibility lay with them, and an irritation that would listen neither to reason nor logic embittered their minds. They had already learned what an incredibly great part chance plays in war, but the reflection brought them no consolation—at anyrate, not at the moment. They knew now that the force which had taken them had been out on the same errand as themselves. The Boer army was always composed of several small detachments, which reconnoitred far in advance and on the flanks of the main body. It was by chance that they had stumbled upon one of these flying columns, with the result that they now sat there as prisoners. What it had been their object to discover they now knew very well, but they had no means of communicating the information to the British army. The whole affair had been so plain and simple that there was really nothing more to be said ; yet it was just because of this that they felt their humiliation doubly, and now sat side by side silently fuming with vexation over the mishap, which was, however, no fault of their own.

Their regiment had learnt so thoroughly what war was that it no longer existed. They themselves had felt the power of blind chance, but that was no reason for throwing up the sponge altogether. Why should not they, for that matter, venture to reckon upon some such chance as had this time been so unfavourable to them ? In war, where thousands of brains are racked merely to frustrate what others have planned ; where mines and countermines are being sprung at every moment ; where hatred, spite, revenge, ambition, and all other ignoble feelings have so large a part in the decision of human destiny,—there is room for the most unexpected events, and that at the most unexpected moment. They knew nothing of what the next morning might have in store for them, and so they hoped for the best. The chance of flight they had not discussed, for the dense darkness and their ignorance of the neighbourhood, as well as other considerations, placed insurmountable difficulties in the way. And so they sat in

a state of fume that increased every moment, waiting for daybreak, which would at least enable them to see their surroundings.

"It's no use brooding over a problem that's insoluble for the time being," said Lieutenant Kennedy, the younger of the two officers. "We are prisoners; the thing is, how long are we going to remain so?"

"I'm freezing," muttered his comrade, who did not seem to have heard, and who, with a shiver, wrapped his cloak more closely around him.

"Sleep, Stephens; you need it. I will watch."

"I don't intend to sleep any more than you do," the other replied obstinately.

"Just as you like."

The answer was unnecessarily surly, and Stephens, noticing the tone, felt his ill-humour increase, while Kennedy began to vex himself because he had not kept his temper better. Neither took the slightest trouble to put right what he knew was a misunderstanding; both relapsed again into a moody silence. What had happened to them was a bagatelle which could not in any way affect the course of the war, but to them it was the greatest event that had yet taken place. All that was wanted to restore their equilibrium and peace of mind was time.

Some twenty paces from them two other men sat talking. Their backs were turned towards the fire, so that their features—already concealed beneath the shadow of their broad hat brims—could not be distinguished. The discussion in which they were engaged was so engrossing that they seemed to have forgotten everything else.

"Thank you, Abraham, for doing as I told you—thank you," said one, speaking with the weak voice of an old man.

"Why should you thank me, Pastor Schmidt?" asked the other in a sonorous voice which reminded one of that which had summoned the dragoons to surrender, although its tone was now very different. "After what you have said these last few days, it will go very much against the grain with me to shed blood. Still, if they had not

surrendered, it would have come to that after all. There now, you see how little man is allowed to decide his own actions."

"No weakness, Abraham!"

"No, no; I know one ought never to compromise with oneself. Yes, pastor, I am at one with you in the matter; I see that you are more in the right than all of us, and for my part I will act accordingly." And, as if speaking to himself, he repeated something that had just been said by the other, and had made a deep impression upon him.

"Lay down your arms! Lay down your arms!" Yes, that is what we all long for, and yet—yet...." He raised his hand and pointed out into the darkness, as if to say, "We see nothing, and know just as little—we and everyone else." Then he said aloud, "It is strange, this shedding of blood and taking of life." Then, as if angry at having conceded more than he saw himself in a position to keep, he added hastily—

"Anyhow, I must defend my country."

"You defend it better by your example, Abraham," said the old man quickly; "some one must be the first."

"The first? It isn't easy to take the lead."

"Remember what the Scripture says: 'Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'"

The quotation plainly made a deep impression on the listener, for his voice shook with repressed emotion as he answered—

"I will turn the other also, I promise you." Thrusting his hat back upon his head, he drew a deep breath as if he had been relieved of a heavy burden. "And now," he said, "I thank you, pastor, for having opened my eyes. Yes, you are right: let each of us do what lies in his power to prevent the misery with which war threatens the whole world. And who am I that I should dare take the life of a fellow-creature, made in God's image!" He rested his cheek on his hand, and continued in quite another tone: "As soon as I meet de Vlies I shall just

say to him, 'I lay down my arms, for one must obey God rather than man.' The commandant will be sure to understand me, even if he doesn't approve my action, but"—here he sorrowfully bowed his head still further—"until I have told him all, I cannot leave these men here and go, for I came"—

"Do you mean by that that you will fight if . . .?"

"If I am forced to. It must be so. I am not free yet, but if I can prevent it I promise you that not a shot shall be fired. Pray that we do not meet any of those whom we call our enemies!"

"I will—for your sake and your son's, for it is terrible to let blood rest upon the head of an innocent child. I only hope no obstacle will be put in your way. You think, of course, that we—that we shall soon overtake the commandant?"

"He went southwards, while I went on with the men from my district to discover the whereabouts of the English. All I have seen are those who lie asleep over there, and it will probably be some time before there is a fight in this part of the country. When I have told de Vlies what he wants to know, then I shall have done my work. And when I tell him how my heart rebels against all this that is going on around me, he will understand me, for he is my friend. Our paths will part; I will ride home to my farm, till my land, and bring up my child to man's estate. And, come what may, I don't move a finger to discharge a rifle. I am a free man, and master of my fate."

A breath of wind sighed plaintively over the silent veldt. It was as if some unseen power had sent it to warn the man who, moved by the solemnity of the moment, had declared his belief in his strength to mark out his path and to follow it. But he paid no heed to it, the old man beside him just as little. Then the latter said affectionately—

"May you succeed, Abraham!"

"I shall," was the confident answer.

"Do not forget that they will mock and scoff at you, Abraham. Be strong, my son!"

"The mocking I mind least of all. I know how difficult it is to keep peace in the midst of war, but my trust is in Him who has given me strength to come to this resolution. He guides my steps ; I have only to follow."

A strong spirit of faith animated these words, and as he listened the old man felt his eyes fill with tears. With that assurance, which in an enthusiast breaks down every obstacle, he stretched forth his hands to heaven.

"I have won a glorious victory !" he exclaimed. Then, for the second time, he repeated—

"May you succeed, Abraham ! I pray you may succeed !"

"Why should I not ? When one has no doubt one must succeed—you yourself have said so."

For a time there was silence. They had finished their talk. And now the two men sat silent in the darkness, their minds steeped in certain old truths which had never been acknowledged by the world, and which would be forgotten the moment they themselves were forgotten. But to them the truths had some meaning, and the man who, having set out to defend his country, had instead laid down his arms because of his firm and full belief that God rather than man should be obeyed, felt himself strangely strengthened by his decision. He felt that he was doing right, and cared little for consequences, for he had no knowledge of the world and of that difficult art known as "living." He had only learned to know himself.

What had happened was, indeed, something very simple—as simple almost as any everyday occurrence. In the midst of the bustle of the camp a man had been made sensible to the voice of conscience ; the only strange thing was that he had listened to it. And then another man had come,—an old man who had retained his childlike faith right on into the winter of life,—and had assured him that he had heard aright. Then the other had yielded, acknowledging that he had been in the wrong, and, regardless of everything, had obeyed the dictates of his better nature.

The log in the fire had nearly burnt itself out, and fell

asunder with a slight noise ; the cold night wind played with the last pale blue flames, while beyond the camp the darkness lay as thick and impenetrable as ever. All seemed to be asleep with the exception of a few sentries, and so profound was the stillness that reigned around that any one who was forced to move involuntarily restricted his action within the smallest possible limits. The two men rose from their places and went towards the prisoners. Silently passing the snoring dragoons, they approached the two officers, who were putting forth their last efforts to keep themselves awake, to await they knew not what. The two men stopped before them, and the taller slowly asked—

“Are you asleep ?”

“No ; and we wish to be left in peace.”

Neither the defiant, unfriendly tone, nor the impatient gesture with which the words were accompanied, seemed to make any impression on the men. They stood motionless, and the one who had asked the question said, as if by way of explanation—

“I am Field-Cornet Van der Nath.”

The officers raised their weary eyelids and looked curiously at the man who, they had heard, was the leader of the enemy. In the darkness they could distinguish a giant form, some six feet and a half high, with amazingly broad shoulders. Presently the last flicker of the dying camp-fire lighted up the objects nearest them, and they discerned first two clear, friendly eyes fixed searchingly upon them as if seeking to pierce their inmost souls, and then a long, curly beard that spread itself over his powerful chest. About him there was no indication of rank ; the only thing that might have distinguished him from those around him was a certain air of assurance, doubtless the result of having been long accustomed to command.

“I only wish to ask if there is anything you want,” he said quietly.

“Thank you, we don’t want anything,” answered both officers at once. They imagined they knew what their position required. Although by an unfortunate circumstance they had been made prisoners, they did not intend

to obtain by any concession better treatment than their comrades in misfortune.

"Very well, then," went on Van der Nath, in the same mild tone, which irritated the officers, "if you will both give me your parole that you will not attempt to escape so long as we are on the march, you shall"—

"We will promise nothing," said Lieutenant Kennedy shortly.

The field-cornet thoughtfully balanced his rifle in his hand for a moment, and answered quietly and deliberately—

"Well, then, I can do nothing more for you. You will be treated like the other prisoners."

"We don't ask anything else."

"Good-night, then—or, rather, good-morning." And he laughed in a soft, pleasant manner, as if from the depths of his beard. "We shall be stirring early," he added, "so you will do well to have an hour's sleep first. There won't be much chance of resting on the way, for we are in a hurry."

"We shall be much obliged if you will spare us your advice. As far as sleeping is concerned, I hope we may be allowed to please ourselves."

Van der Nath's friendly expression turned into one of astonishment, and he took the unnecessary trouble of turning away in order to hide it. He could not conceive why his advice, prompted as it was by good-will, should be so received, but what vexed him more than anything else was the harsh tone in which it was rejected. His embarrassment was such as most good people feel when they have been snubbed.

Lieutenant Kennedy, who had last spoken, glanced triumphantly at his companion. He found a sort of pleasure in the giant's confusion, in seeing him stand there like a scolded schoolboy. It was some consolation to have given somebody a lesson of some sort, and so the lieutenant closed the short interview with an icy—

"Good-morning, gentlemen!"

Van der Nath nodded his head silently and had turned

half round to go, when his companion stepped forward and, with the long-suffering yet impatient disapproval of age for the thoughtless self-confidence of youth, said—

“Not so hastily, young man, not so hastily! Think of your position!”

“I presume your words do not contain a threat?”

“Heaven forbid that I should threaten a prisoner! No, no!”

The old man, whose white hair, falling over his shoulders, showed that he must be at least seventy years old, took from the pocket of his ample coat a thick book, which he opened.

“Since you do not wish to sleep, perhaps you will not object to a little conversation?”

Lieutenant Kennedy, who had acted as spokesman throughout, glanced suspiciously at the book in the old man’s hand, and answered a little scornfully—

“You need not give yourself the trouble of attempting my conversion. I am a Christian.”

“Ah, how many claim to be Christian without knowing what the word ‘Christian’ means!”

“I flatter myself I am one—and that’s enough.”

The field-cornet touched his companion’s arm as a hint that he had better put an end to this useless wrangling by going, but the old man energetically shook his head.

“I will speak,” he said. “The sun that shines upon the evil and the good will soon dawn upon another day, and once more it will find men doing only that which is foolish and wicked. He who preached peace on earth and good-will towards men will see again and again that His goodness is thrown away, and that His mercy is answered only by forgetfulness of His almighty power. He whose patience knows no bounds will see once more that the night, given by Him for repentance and amendment, has only been spent in fresh preparations for worse things still. O ye people, who live in a belief that does not live, and profess a humility whose only fruit is pride, when will ye see that the day of wrath is at hand?”

The old man’s voice, which had been somewhat weak

and trembling at first, now rang out full and strong ; animated by a sort of inner rapture, it rose to such a volume that all three listeners forgot for the moment who it was that spoke. It was a voice from the surrounding darkness and the mist, a voice that moved them strangely, and awakened slumbering instincts and thoughts within them. To them it seemed—what the voice of truth and unselfishness seems fated in this world ever to be—“a voice crying in the wilderness.” It was the wind that breathes over hill and dale, calling the mountain echo into life, and then dying gradually away and leaving no trace behind. It was not the wild, devastating storm of winter, that roots up everything and dashes it in pieces ; it was only the gentle breeze of spring, which does good for the sake of doing good, and about which no one therefore troubles himself. But of this neither the old man nor his companion seemed aware ; the one listened as devoutly as the other spoke the words which his heart plainly told him to be right.

“Young man,” the speaker continued, after a short pause, “do you know what this war means ?” He did not wait for any answer, but went on : “No ; neither you nor any one of the two hundred thousand Englishmen who are roving to and fro about the veldt of this unhappy land knows why it is you wound and kill. And I venture to say that no one else knows either—I just as little as you. I see only that something terrible is happening all around ; that it goes on day after day, becoming day after day more terrible and more irreparable. I see that only hate and wickedness reign around me. I can give you no idea of the dreadful work in which you have been given a hand. I am utterly at a loss to grasp, to understand”—

Lieutenant Kennedy shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and, seeing this, the old man continued—

“All I know is that the God whom we all worship has bidden us love our neighbour as ourself. But who does it—who, I ask ? All of us—you and I—have promised this, and it is our duty to obey. We know that the disobedient will be punished. The worst punishment befalls

the murderer, and is not that as it should be? But now men are being killed by the hundred; the laws of God and of humanity are silenced, and a new law that rewards crime with medals of bravery, with praise and personal honours, has been set up for the occasion. That, you answer, is war. But can anything explain or excuse all this? The shedding of blood is contrary to the religion we all profess, against moral law, against that civilisation in which you justly pride yourselves. Criminals are put to death and rendered harmless; but among you, as among us, it is the best men, the most irreproachable and most honourable men, who are punished. Is the sense of justice of Christian nations really sleeping the eternal sleep on this question? The whole world is man's fatherland; it is for the welfare of all, wherever human beings are to be found. How then can one being deprive another of life because he is a stranger—how can one go to war?

“ You may answer that you take your orders from those who have the power to enforce them. But is it worthy of any person possessed of free-will never to think for himself, but always to obey? To what end then is your own reason? And how can you look down contemptuously upon the savage, whose trust is in his weapons and who lets them decide his quarrels? A human being owes a duty not only to others but also to himself, and the higher he thinks he stands the greater is his duty. And as for war, has any war ever restored more than other wars had already destroyed? Has the habit of not thinking become so widespread that even educated people will sell their very birthright before everything in creation, seizing any excuse for not using their brains? Why, then, were they given them? To think, to use our reason—that is all we need do, and it is the one thing we do not do. Why—why is this?

“ These are many questions, and everybody knows well how they must be answered. Yet no one acts accordingly. It is not war that mankind has to thank for its development, and yet war prevails. What can this mean?

“ And all the men, women, and children on whom falls

the misery with which war afflicts the land—what have they done? Nothing at all. Their only fault was not to know what war really was. Are they then, for their ignorance, to be punished with the loss of goods and life? They have allowed themselves to be led astray. Yes, but that is not a crime at all in proportion to the punishment. And you yourselves, what do you know of war—this or any other war? About as much as we. ‘Peace, peace!—that is the prayer of the whole world. But ‘War, war!—that is the answer everywhere. When will the day come when people will cease to do each other injustice?’

The old man stopped short as if his strength were exhausted, and then, in a subdued tone, he repeated some words which the listeners were only just able to catch—

“Peace on earth, good-will towards men!”

For a time there was a painful silence. Lieutenant Kennedy was the first to shake off the feeling of awkwardness produced by the strange harangue, and as closely as the darkness would permit he proceeded to scan the aged speaker. He could not boast of much knowledge of men, but he soon convinced himself that both the tall field-cornet and the old man beside him were a couple of simple souls against whom he should be able to wage an indisputable dialectical superiority. After having been annoyed at first by the old man’s pertinacity, he now thought it would be amusing to match himself in argument with those whom he had made up his mind to call his enemies. Besides, he thought the idea of forcing one’s opinions upon a stranger without invitation or encouragement so simple and inept, that an educated man—and the lieutenant was quite conscious of being one—could only smile compassionately at it, and this too helped to put him on his mettle.

But was he really a simpleton, that great heavy-footed giant, who stood there leaning on his rifle, devoutly following every word that fell from his companion’s lips? Well, that would soon be seen. And the old man—who might he be? He had not introduced himself, nor had he indicated by a word his position. He might have passed

for a pastor, but the officers had already learnt to be suspicious of appearances, and so they suspended judgment. Meanwhile, however, it seemed to them that the silence was lasting too long ; so quietly, and almost in a friendly tone, Lieutenant Kennedy began—

“ You abhor war and bloodshed, Mr. ——, Mr. —— ” He paused purposely, to give the old man a chance to state his name and calling, but the latter seemingly did not understand this, for he made no attempt to fill up the gap with an answer. The lieutenant again shrugged his shoulders—evidently these two had not the slightest idea of manners—and asked sarcastically—

“ Then why do you fight yourselves ; why don’t you surrender ? ”

“ My friend,” said the field-cornet moodily, “ if an enemy invaded your country would you, without any more ado, surrender and change your nationality ? ”

“ Never ! There’s not an Englishman who would think of such a thing.”

“ Then we need not discuss the subject. We look upon it in the same light—and God forgive us our sins ! ”

Two equally strong wills had come into collision and nothing had been gained. Both saw this, and the exchange of opinions was discontinued.

The old man shook his white head, as if trying to throw off something that oppressed him, and again began to talk in a mild and somewhat tired voice—

“ ‘ As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.’ Is it necessary to know more than this in order to live ? ”

To this it was not very easy to reply, so Lieutenant Kennedy adroitly overcame the difficulty by asking a decidedly personal question. The tall fragile figure aroused his curiosity, and as there was nothing else for him to do at the moment, he thought he might just as well obtain some information. With a complaisant smile, which the darkness unfortunately hid, he turned to the old man and said—

“ Sir, I have not yet the pleasure of knowing with whom ”—

“ Oh, indeed ! ” exclaimed the old man, and the ring in

his voice told that he laughed. "I have moved about so much among my own friends here that I have forgotten a good deal. But instead I have learnt much else."

The young man bowed slightly, while the other went on, almost as if speaking to himself—

"Who am I? How shall I tell you?"

The lieutenant coughed slightly and nudged his comrade to awaken his attention.

"Ah, now I know," said the old man gently. "You see in me a poor old missionary, who many, many years ago now went out among the blacks in this part of the world to enlighten them. In such a matter as that I never imagined that the way could be difficult; I even dreamed of great conquests, for I believed firmly and fast in my mission. But I made a mistake. 'There is no God,' said the ignorant blacks; 'the white man has so many that he does not himself know which is the true one. How can you expect us to believe your word to-day, when to-morrow a Catholic will come and tell us that what you have told us is lies and that his God is the best and most powerful, while next week a Methodist comes crying out loudly that both of you have deceived us? We will keep our gods, until you have become wiser and more certain about the truth.'

"It was true: these ignorant people knew more than I. It cost me many a hard struggle to recognise the mistake of my fellow-workers. But I did it; there was nothing else to be done. For a long time I had known that to reach one's goal one must first conquer oneself; so I bowed myself, and instead of talking so much of God I preached the most splendid of His texts: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' Sometimes they listened to me sneeringly. 'That is another of the white man's many lies,' they answered; 'we must break our weapons in pieces that you may be the better able to destroy us. Why should we keep peace when the white men do not do so among themselves?' And this also was true. Do you now understand what war means, and this war in particular?"

He placed his hand to his forehead and continued slowly—

"But it was about myself that I was to speak. Ah! there is little to be said about an old man who has travelled the long road of misreckoning. I am Pastor Schmidt—a very ordinary name for a very ordinary person—and what I have said of myself already is too much. Who am I? A preacher without a church. But who wants a building of stone or wood when the great vault of heaven lies over us, when every stone can be used as a pulpit, when one has a voice strong enough to be heard by any passer-by who will listen to it? What else is to be said of me? Only this: I have grown up among this people; I see with their eyes, I think and feel as they do. I am at home among these simple peasants; I love them as they love me, and in earlier days, when resting after my wanderings among the Kaffir tribes, I used to settle down sometimes with one, sometimes with another, of the Dornenburg farmers. Much more than this I have not been able to do—less than ever, now that war has broken out. My fields are laid waste, and weeds run over them rampant. . . . Yes, war has broken out; I follow my friends as before. I wait and hope. What more can I do?"

Behind and beside the missionary some fifty men wearing broad-brimmed hats had gathered. They stood leaning upon their rifles listening to him, as they had no doubt often done before. They looked a strange crowd in the faint glimmer of early dawn, whose pale streaks seemed to have joined together in the night to find a chink in the dull mist through which their light might break triumphantly at last and fall upon the weary, fickle children of men—who were always praying for light, more light, and who yet cursed it when it came.

Had a stranger appeared upon the scene his thoughts would perhaps have gone back to the early Puritans. Like them, these men also had banded themselves together, armed and prepared to resist everything in the day when persecution threatened them on every side, and here, too, sat two of their descendants in direct line as the implacable enemies of these Puritans. Nothing escaped the alert intelligence of Lieutenant Kennedy, and for a moment

it seemed to him strange that a duty, which bade him hate entire strangers and injure them with every means at his disposal, should have been established among these people also—that they too should feel bound to hate and injure those about whom they knew nothing. But immediately he dismissed all such troublesome thoughts and looked about him. There lay the dragoons, sleeping the heavy sleep of the overwrought. They had done their day's work; and as for what the next day would bring, it would be time enough to think of that when it had dawned and its sun had shone upon them.

“H'm!” muttered the young man to himself, “those fellows are happy enough over there; they need not trouble to think.”

A moist wind swept sighing over the plain. A sort of silver-grey dew began to spread itself over everything like a veil, forcing its way through the coverings of the sleepers, chilling their limbs and rendering any movement oppressive. The two officers were too proud to betray the discomfort which they began to feel, for there was nothing to show that the Boers troubled themselves about the raw, biting morning air. Suddenly, however, Lieutenant Stephens swayed forward, and immediately sought to support himself against his companion.

The missionary was at his side in an instant, bidding him drink from a leather flask which Van der Nath had silently placed in the old man's outstretched hand. Two good gulps of the strong cognac brought a little colour into his cheeks, but his eyes, which were bleared and lustreless, showed plainly that some dangerous malady had treacherously lain in wait for him.

“Fever,” said the missionary in a matter-of-fact fashion, after carefully feeling the young officer's pulse.

The men standing about silently nodded their concurrence. They were not at all surprised to hear it; they seemed rather to think it quite natural that a foreigner who had just arrived in their country should be unable to stand the violent changes of temperature. But if they showed no deeper sympathy for the sick man than this, there was

certainly nothing in their bearing or expression to indicate that they were glad to see an enemy suffering and helpless.

"Won't you go on, pastor?" said Lieutenant Stephens, when he had recovered a little. "This doesn't mean much?" he added in an inquiring tone, more, apparently, as some slight consolation to himself than in the expectation of getting a corroborative answer.

The old man understood his apprehension, and looked away so as not to meet the anxious look in his eyes. He had knelt beside so many sickbeds that he could see at once whether danger was at hand or not. Here he saw many signs that the case might well prove hopeless, and his dejected look told as plainly as words could have done that he was far from hopeful about the issue.

Fortunately the young man saw nothing of this. He crept as near as possible to his comrade, and, interpreting the pastor's silence in the most favourable fashion, he said, with that lightheartedness peculiar to so many sick people who hope for the best to the last—

"Do continue, pastor! When I hear your voice I don't feel the fever."

Without observing the selfishness that promoted the request, the missionary took his place beside him, ready to accede to it. He smiled a little sadly to himself at the thought that one to whom he had addressed his words should desire to listen to them for the sake of their sound alone. But even if it should only be as a sort of lullaby for a sick man, he was willing to speak. He soon forgot his discomfiture, and, once more full of his subject, he began—

"You ask me to continue, and I do so willingly. It is, indeed, my calling to be your comforter."

"Thank you!" said the fever-stricken man feebly, leaning more heavily against his comrade.

Lieutenant Kennedy bit his lip with vexation at Stephen's weakness, and stared straight in front of him by way of letting it be understood that the preacher's words had made no impression whatever upon him, who was well.

"Ah—if one could only find words capable of awaking sleeping consciousness, of dragging people out of the rut

of indifference!" exclaimed the old man. "If only the words could be found and there was a tongue to utter them at the right moment, then no war could ever break out. And yet, who knows? Indifference is so great, custom is so oppressive, that monstrous things happen everywhere, and yet the wonder of wonders is that it never seems to strike anyone that it could be otherwise.

"War! I tremble at the sound of the word. War! How much does it not mean? All that the hand of man and the skill of man has created is swept away, life is extinguished like a flickering light, and what has taken a century to build is pulled down in a few hours. War,—why is it often unavoidable, and how comes it that thinking men can be willing to expose themselves to all its miseries and terrors? Why should men shed blood and slay each other when their disputes might be settled by other means? For you will admit that common sense must be able to find many ways out, where brute force can know of only one. And if nothing else can do so, should not self-interest restrain a people from throwing themselves into an undertaking of such vastness? War is, indeed, an open sore through which the prosperity of a nation oozes away, and generations are required to heal the wound inflicted by the struggle.

"Perhaps this war is like all others; perhaps what is happening here will be repeated elsewhere next time that it breaks out. Next time"—a shudder ran through the old man's frame, and he smiled painfully as he exclaimed: "Will men never learn anything from their misfortunes?" Then, in the same tone as before, he went on: "Here the small nations—for nowadays it seems to be by numbers and wealth that national greatness is measured—the small nations can see what they have to expect if the course we have taken is for all time to be considered the right one.

"It has been reserved for England to give the small nations of the world the warning. Which of them will be the next to apply it? And who knows that such disregard for a nation that is believed to be the weaker may not infect some other great Power, which will justify itself

by your example? Hitherto it has been the honour of England to be in the vanguard of civilisation, and to be the defender of the weak and the oppressed. And now she has all at once broken faith with her traditions; she has thrown away her ideals, and sold her proud birthright for shares in the Rand Mines. If many of you were not blinded by a false patriotism which confuses honour with profit, you would long ago have perceived how immeasurably more you have lost in this war than we. Or is it that liberty to do wrong is now necessary for a country's greatness?

“One other question: Would you have attacked a great Power for the same reasons that you attacked us? I hardly think so, and I do not think that you yourselves think so either. There is one policy for great States, and another for small; one moral code for the strong, and another for the weak.

“But do not let us dwell any longer on this. All this is but a trifle compared with the treachery that your country has been beguiled into committing against the whole world. There was great joy here when we heard that a Peace Congress had been held in Europe, to which representatives from all countries had been invited. There was great joy here, I say, for now, we thought, all fear for the future was at an end. Now that all differences could be settled in a friendly way, war could not menace us more than other nations. So we, like all the world, drew a sigh of relief. ‘At last! at last!’ were the words that came from many an oppressed breast, and a new light came into many a weary eye. For now there was an end to dissension and strife. The millennium had come!

“Alas, how we were deceived! How the whole world was deceived! Hardly was the ink dry upon the protocols which you also had signed, before you dropped the pen and took up the sword. The angels’ Christmas greeting to mankind was changed into scornful laughter; the first great Peace Congress ended with a war. And worst of all, while your soldiers were bleeding in a foreign land, or dying by hundreds in wretched hospital tents that freely

let in the wind and rain, your newspapers announced triumphantly that your Sovereign had set her name to the resolutions adopted at the Hague. If anyone else had said that, there is not a man in these two countries who would have hesitated in telling him to his face that it was a lie.

“But you yourselves have said it, and I believe it, though I do not understand it. What, then, was all this affair of the Congress? Was it merely a cruel jest at the expense of a doomed people? I do not know; I have nothing to judge by except your own words and acts. But some day, when a new century records the history of its predecessor, on one half page these words will be written: ‘At one moment something great was expected to happen, but it never did. What, then, were these papers which were signed with such great solemnity? A beautiful Utopia? The dream of a visionary? No,—dust thrown in the eyes of a befooled people—a proof that men can do anything but learn to know themselves.’

“And if we at a distance contemplate civilised and Christian Europe, what do we see? Commercial interest—nothing but business and the calculation of interest! The great ideas—for they have existed—are forgotten. In everything one does business—in patriotism, in politics. Everything is a business, and the working expenses must be kept down. Men rob—or annex, as it is called—but with many and pompous apologies. They justify themselves by saying that it is all for the welfare of the country,—which is always identical with the welfare of the capitalists,—and speak far and wide of their country’s ancient honour which is entered to the very penny in the credit column of the account. Civilisation is branded with materialism, like the mark of Cain, and no statesman—or anyone else, for that matter—thinks of doing anything without first reckoning up the profit of the enterprise, and if only he thinks it big enough then every other consideration must yield.

“And such statesmen look upon a country’s fate with the narrow vision of some small shopkeeper in a back street, who sees only his own little business, with greedy

eye counting up his day's takings, and slapping his chest exultingly should a silver coin occasionally shine among the dirty coppers. And more joyful still are they if they know that they have gained their end by craft, for that, they think, is the proof of their business capacity. And like the small shopkeeper they stand in fear of rivals.

"Until you stepped forth and pointed it out, no one knew the way out of the blind alley into which their blind desire for gain had dragged the nations. Away with fine phrases! They deceive only those who wish to be deceived. Think no longer of Providence! People never follow its teaching; if they do, the reward is as late as it is uncertain. The voice of conscience . . . ? Pshaw! Success is worth more than all that. Here it is a race of life and death; here everything depends on the use of one's strength.

"And whither has that so highly prized word 'humanity' betaken itself? If it were anything else than the name of something that has no existence, it would, of itself, have been strong enough to prevent war. Wolves fight only when they are famished; they tear each other to pieces only under the stress of necessity; but civilised and Christian Europe concludes its first Peace Congress with a war!"

The missionary suddenly broke off his harangue, bent his head, and began suddenly to pray. The men standing behind him at once followed his example: every head was uncovered and bent, and a slow monotonous muttering came from every man's lips. The sick officer was about to do likewise, but a look of disapprobation from his comrade restrained him, and in some confusion he dropped the hand that he had raised to his helmet, glancing questioningly at Kennedy as he did so. But he took no notice, and only gazed curiously at the group of sturdy devotees before him. Apparently he was utilising the occasion to study the enemy which modern statesmanship had placed in opposition to his countrymen, and with a slight smile he told himself that now, at anyrate, they did not appear very dangerous. His smile grew broader and

almost compassionate as he proceeded to ask himself how these peasants, who seemed so clumsy and heavy in all their movements, could possibly have dared to think of armed resistance.

He had no time to continue his reflections, for just at this moment his comrade fell forward with a moan. This sign of helplessness vexed him; with these hardy foemen standing by, he could not tolerate the thought that an English officer should be ill. So, to obliterate the impression which this little event was designed to produce, he said to the missionary, as soon as he had finished praying—

“Pardon me, sir; to what country do you belong?”

Like a true child of his age, he considered it great audacity on the part of this thin, sparsely clad old man to criticise so thoroughly everything that he himself had learned to respect. And the circumstance that it was only a row of simple peasants that stood before him made his smile more provocative and his bearing more defiant than ever. Obviously, he did not mean to knuckle under to anyone.

The missionary surveyed him for a moment as if to discover whether the words conveyed a friendly question or concealed some double meaning. The officer met his inquiring look without flinching; his expression became harder and colder, and in it the other's frank look encountered dark defiance.

“My son,” said the old man, still gentle and friendly in his tone, “I belong to no country; he who preaches God's word belongs to all.”

“I asked merely because you speak English without any foreign accent,” was the answer, given somewhat ungraciously.

“You are mistaken,” rejoined the old man quietly, his voice betraying no impatience, although he understood the innuendo behind the other's words. “My parents were German. And now, since you know it, we will not dispute about the beliefs and obligations which men think they must obey because they happen to be born on one

side or the other of a certain border line. Will you in return answer me a question as frankly?"

"Let me hear what it is."

"Do not hurry, take your time." He paused for a moment, and then asked: "Will you think for yourself?"

"No!" answered the officer, without the slightest pause or hesitation, looking his questioner straight in the face.

From his own standpoint, instinct had prompted the only right answer. Had he not right on his side? What was the use of thinking when it was so much more convenient to obey and let others undertake the responsibility? There was so little reason to do so, when it was only blind obedience that brought honour and distinction, with all the other advantages which an ordinary human being covets.

"We are doomed!" murmured the missionary faintly; and he tottered as if he had received a blow. He seemed only now to realise how inexorable war could be. In spite of some of the words he had just uttered, he entertained a faint hope that a better day might yet dawn. It was in order to gain strength that he had sought to persuade the prisoner to concede willingly something which—as far as it was likely to influence events—was in itself worthless. But the young man's swift decision, launched forth without a moment's thought, mercilessly extinguished the feeble flame. And again he murmured—

"We are doomed!"

The tall field-cornet turned his eyes upwards at these words, and there was a mystic light in his look which beautified his rough features.

"That can only be decided by One who is stronger than we," he said hopefully, as he pointed upwards.

"Yes," answered the missionary quickly, "the Lord of heaven and earth rules over us all, and over everything."

And like a steel spring that has been bent so as to be almost ready to snap, he straightened himself suddenly, and exclaimed, with a vigour of which no one would have supposed him capable—

"Providence never allows injustice to triumph! The Lord bless us and keep us!"

CHAPTER III

DURING THE RETREAT

THE sun had long been up. At first it had shot forth a few pale, straggling rays; then its whole light flamed out suddenly, and darkness vanished. For a time a cold, damp mist lay over the earth and besprinkled the grass as if with dew, its pearly drops glittering and flashing in the sunshine. But presently there came across the plain a hot, dry blast from the south, and in a moment the moisture disappeared, sucked up by the earth and the air.

With bent head the missionary passed through the knot of men, who silently and phlegmatically made way for him. The field-cornet did not stir for some moments; he gazed first after the old man, and then at the two officers, the younger of whom seemed, by his bearing, to excite in him undisguised surprise. Then he shook his head, threw his rifle over his shoulder, and said, as if he had just awakened from some unpleasant dream—

“It’s about time we were getting on.”

The men about him dispersed in silence, each going off to attend to his particular duties. By their gloomy expression and their repeated shakings of the head they showed that they felt themselves disillusioned. Not one of them could understand how the words that had just burst forth with such convincing warmth from the innermost recesses of a bleeding heart could possibly be turned aside with a sneer; and they began to feel, perhaps for the first time, that their foes possessed something which—more surely than their numerical superiority and their inexhaustible reinforcements—must decide the struggle in their favour.

Silently and dejectedly they saddled their horses, yoked the oxen to the waggons, and made everything ready for starting.

The two captured officers looked on coldly and superciliously as the men worked silently about them, the elder—weak and knocked up though he was—trying his utmost to be worthy of his stubborn companion in this respect.

“I am freezing,” said Lieutenant Stephens suddenly, and he shivered as he wrapped his cloak about him.

“Freeze away,” said the other lightly, “only don’t let them notice it. See, they are bringing our horses.”

With a curt nod he dismissed the man who had led the horses forward, and sprang into the saddle. As he sat with his reins gathered in one hand, ready to ride on, he looked very unlike a newly taken prisoner, but rather like the leader of the whole band. Some such feeling was working vaguely in his own mind, for he felt that he had won a great moral victory, since his refusal to think must have given his captors an unpalatable truth to digest. So, with a compassionate smile at the insignificant powers of resistance of the peasant band, he turned to his comrade and urged him to hurry up.

“I’m terribly cold,” said Stephens for the second time.

The younger officer’s contemptuous look changed for a moment to one of uneasiness; then, somewhat impatiently, he looked down at his companion, who was slowly and unsteadily clambering into his saddle.

“Has the old man’s sermon made a strong impression upon you?” he asked.

“I can’t deny it.”

“Well—between you and me—even I felt moved by it. He plainly believes in what he says; and, what’s worse, thousands of others believe the same. Come closer, so that we can talk. It’s a fine sensation to have a good mount under one, isn’t it? One feels quite another man, and fit for anything. For goodness’ sake, don’t look about you so uneasily; they will fancy we are thinking of escaping. Don’t look so surprised!” he continued, as his friend’s eye wonderingly met his. “Of course,” he said in

a low whisper, "we will have a try to get away if there is any chance, but—hush!"

Two Boers, rifle in hand, rode up and directed their horses immediately behind those of the officers.

"I wonder if these fellows can speak English," whispered Lieutenant Kennedy irritably. "It will be rather a nuisance to have to alter one's conversation according to the linguistic powers of one's captors."

"I shouldn't mind them, Kennedy."

"Nonsense! A good deal depends on it. Let's try and find out how matters stand."

With the same easy assurance that he had displayed all along, the young officer turned round in his saddle and surveyed the arrangements for their departure.

"Not bad," he admitted, rather unwillingly, as he saw that scouts had been sent out in front and on both flanks just as the whole troop, at a signal from the field-coronet, began to move. With easy unconcern, as if the matter did not really interest him, he scanned his two custodians.

"H'm! the long one looks a simpleton, but the little dark fellow on the left looks wide-awake enough. Look here, my lad," he said, addressing the latter, "your horse looks as if he had plenty of stay in him, but he is certainly not swift of foot."

"No; a rifle shot goes swifter," answered the man quietly. "I'm not a bad shot," he added shortly.

The officer bit his lip. The hint was too clear to be mistaken.

"I wasn't far wrong," he said slowly to his comrade. "He has a good head. We shan't succeed in deceiving that fellow. Well, that makes no difference to me. Do you speak French?" he asked the man suddenly in that language.

The two Boers met his sharp, searching glance with a look akin to astonishment, which completely dispelled all apprehension on the point.

"That much is certain," he continued in a light tone; "these fellows understand only Dutch and a little English. So we shall be compelled—more's the pity—to exercise our

knowledge, imperfect as it may be, of the language of the Gaul." And he laughed, delighted at the thought that the ignorance of their guards should enable them to talk in comparative freedom. "Don't bother about the men," he went on as Stephens turned to look back; "the fellows understand well enough that any attempt at quarrelling would be foolish; and for the present, the less we trouble ourselves about them the more we shall be trusted. Just look as if the whole business didn't concern you; it will make them more sure of us, and when once they begin to have confidence in us, then our turn will come. But we were going to have a talk. Say something, old fellow; don't hang your head like that."

"I can't help it. But, Kennedy, I have begun to think for myself."

"Is it necessary for me to remind you of a soldier's first duty? Most probably not. You stand in high favour with your superiors; but if you do not shake yourself free of all this unnecessarily foolish sentiment, my dear Stephens, I shall begin to doubt of your future. How do you think all that sort of thing can concern mere 'supers' on the great stage of the world. Be satisfied that you are on the strongest side; that augurs well for recompense when the day of reckoning comes. No, don't say anything—it is perhaps better that you shouldn't talk; you have lost your balance for the time being. Though I am younger than you I will give you one piece of good advice, between ourselves. Don't criticise, even in your most secret thoughts, those on whom your advancement depends. That is a condition of existence. The whole world, the nations, individuals too, recognise but one watchword—Progress. And for that end all means are good. Nowadays the worth of a thing is not decided by its moral value; it is the issue alone that counts—success is the only goal. Our leaders perceive it, and act relentlessly upon it—that is their strength. We need not fear because some other great Power censures us; there is no one who, situated as we are, would act differently. What the smaller States think about it we need not ask; in any case they can't say

much that we do not like, and if they should be clever enough to place obstacles in our way we are strong enough to bring them to reason. The people? Pooh! they follow their leaders without questioning; they have to be content with shouting; they never get beyond mere words. No, Stephens; old England's greatness lies just in this: that she takes no notice of the wishes of others; and I am proud to belong to a nation which, regardless of the whole world's envy, does what she likes."

"But there is a Providence."

"No doubt; but in this case Providence, for the present, is on our side, for we shall be right in the end. It may take some time—and it is annoying that it should—but in any case we will reach our goal. One continent belongs to us already; so do large portions of the others, and this country, with its inexhaustible wealth, is plainly designed to become ours some time. The sea will continue to be our strength. We have begun from the right side, for with the command of the water the land is sure to follow. It's a scandal that the authorities should go so carefully to work and be so stingy with the funds. So far, the old fellow over there was right: there is nothing ennobling in the business. But if we are only allowed to go on undisturbed in the way we have begun, we shall soon be done with tyranny—Imperialism, as they call it, save the mark!"

"You are very young, Kennedy."

"The more I shall be able to do in the world," was the quick reply. And, wholly taken up with his own train of thought, the young officer continued—

"Liberty? Pooh! When the only function of Liberty is to haggle about the working capital and convert the interest on our debts to avaricious rivals, it may as well go hang! Depend upon it, I am right when I say that no one needs such liberty. Are you still cold, Stephens?"

The other turned his face, which was covered with cold sweat, but did not speak.

"You must excuse me," continued Kennedy; "I forgot that your father is a member of Parliament. Perhaps he belongs to those who wrangle with the Ministry; perhaps

he simply keeps silent and votes with them. Well, that is his affair. But, with all deference for a man I don't know, I will say that he might very well make a better use of his position. Besides, how can he have the presumption to give with one hand and take away with the other? How can he allow his own son to serve in a war for which he refuses to vote the necessary funds? It is thoroughly English in its absurdity. You must excuse me if I think it utterly incomprehensible."

"I excuse anything. For the moment, I am only thinking of one thing."

"Well—and what is that?"

Although Lieutenant Stephens was considerably the elder of the two, he cast an apologetic glance at his comrade before he spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I am thinking of the fact that we and our enemy both pray to one and the same God."

"Well, what of that? There is only the one God."

The answer came quick and sharp like the click of a lock when the key is turned. Lieutenant Kennedy himself must have thought it peculiarly pat, for he proceeded to whistle a lively air, as if to give Stephens time to recover himself.

But the latter was not disposed to abandon the reflections in which he had been sunk. With even more diffidence than before he resumed—

"Between our religions there is hardly any difference worthy of the name. Before we came out, a clergyman prayed for victory for our arms, and before every fight another clergyman has invoked Heaven for the same thing. Almost in the same fashion the clergy of our enemy send up the same prayers to the same God. Are we really born hypocrites, or what does it mean? What? Can you, can anyone explain it?"

"H'mph! Are you religious, then? I wasn't aware of it."

"My mother is," answered Lieutenant Stephens gently, as if politely seeking to palliate some serious defect in himself.

"I admire your dutiful veneration, and I bow to the

woman who has exercised such an influence upon your life," said Kennedy, baring his head and bowing slightly ; "but I can't understand how you can mix up two such totally different things. What has politics to do with religion ? This business is purely political ; the war was begun more to show an envious Europe that we don't draw back when it is essential that we shall maintain our position as the first in the rank of nations, than for anything else. If that obstinate old man in Pretoria—just look how these two fellows there are pricking up their ears—had not helped us a bit on our way, we should have been obliged to climb his verandah and fling him out of his own house. We need not do that now, but don't think that we should show ourselves grateful on that account. This war, among other things, is a warning to the smaller States, not from us alone but also from those great Powers who looked on with malicious joy at our early reverses, and then, as soon as the wind changed, overwhelmed us with congratulations. Two small nations have followed in our wake ; well, we know pretty well what their tail-wagging is worth, but we take it graciously. Flattery is always pleasant, and it is amusing to see their timidity or their stupidity when we know that we are strong enough to do without it all. Do you take any interest in the politics of it ? "

"A little," stammered Lieutenant Stephens, somewhat taken aback at his comrade's unexpected flow of words.

"Well, of course, you are a soldier and nothing more," came the answer, almost contemptuously, but still with a distinct ring of admiration in its tone. "You are fortunate, you who can rest content with one thing ; but I—I am—Why, what in the world is that going on over there ? "

There was some cause for the exclamation, for the advance guard had suddenly come to a halt, and a dozen men were making excited gestures round their gigantic leader. Van der Nath waved his hand reassuringly to those behind, and shouted something which the two officers could not hear although they did their utmost. Presently, they conjectured what the cause must be when they saw about a score of men turn their horses to the left,

gallop swiftly off, and disappear behind a long stretch of kopjes. Another patrol, numbering half the other and led by the field-cornet himself, at once rode forward, while the remainder of the band with the waggons swang off to the right and held on quickly in that direction.

“Our people must be in the neighbourhood,” said Lieutenant Kennedy, raising himself in his stirrups and trying to get a view over the ground. But the surrounding hills prevented him from seeing anything, and in rather a bad humour he continued his ride.

“Hurry up, there!” said the shorter of the two Boers roughly.

The lieutenant was annoyed by the unceremoniousness of the reproof, and turned half round with a look of defiance.

The Boer endured it without moving a muscle, but, seeing that the officer showed a decided inclination to keep back his horse rather than hasten its pace, he repeated menacingly—

“Hurry up, I say!”

“And if I don’t feel inclined to obey, what then?”

The Boer rode up to his side, and muttered between his clenched teeth—

“Three months ago my father had four sons; now he has only two left. Where the other two are no one knows.” He paused a moment and added: “So, if you give me a chance to put a bullet through you, I shall be much obliged.”

And to give point to his words he cocked his rifle.

The officer swallowed his wrath and spurred his horse. He saw that he had been greatly mistaken in some of the enemy. Among them there were no doubt many who, like the man beside him, had private wrongs to avenge; that this man at least would not hesitate to avenge his was to be seen by his dark look. The young officer therefore submitted to the inevitable, and put his horse to a short gallop, which quickly brought him up with the waggons.

This fatiguing journey continued without any apparent

reason for several hours. The course lay constantly between undulating hills which narrowly limited the outlook ; frequently the prisoners imagined they were about to come out upon the open plain, only to find their view blocked by a fresh kopje several miles in length. Towards noon a short halt was made beside a small stream that was almost dried up. A few water-melons were produced, and the Boers, of whom there were now only about thirty, quickly peeled the big juicy fruit and swallowed some slices of it without quitting their saddles. Then, after the horses had drunk a little of the dirty water from a pool among the stones, they pushed on.

It was not long before it became apparent that Lieutenant Stephens was no longer able to keep upright in his saddle. His weakness had increased during the arduous ride, and in spite of the oppressive heat his whole body shivered with ague. During the short halt he had tried to eat a piece of melon, but the sweet vanilla flavour of the fruit only nauseated him. Suddenly, before anyone could prevent it, he fell to the ground.

Next moment the old missionary was at his side. At a sign from him two dragoons lifted him up and laid him in the last waggon, which had been fitted up to receive the sick and the wounded. The old man made up a bed for the patient, as well as circumstances permitted, with some skins and woollen blankets, and took his place beside him, steadying his aching head as he sat. The Boer who commanded in Van der Nath's absence gave the order to proceed, and on they went again at the same furious speed. But instead of advancing between the kopjes, they turned their horses down into a *sluit*,¹ along which they continued their march.

Lieutenant Kennedy kept in the vicinity of the waggon in which his friend had been placed. This illness, which could not have come at a more inopportune moment, alarmed him, and for the time being he dismissed all his plans of flight, without, however, abandoning all hope that some favourable opportunity might yet show itself. As he

¹ A dried-up river or stream.

had no longer anyone to whom he could express his thoughts, and as new ones kept crowding upon him, he was now compelled to seek counsel of himself. Nevertheless he did not neglect to note carefully everything that went on about him. That he must soon be released he felt certain ; the question was how that would be brought about. His horse was much too tired for him to depend upon its speed, and, besides, his two guards never relaxed their attention for a moment. Whenever he glanced back cautiously over his shoulder he encountered the dark look of the young Boer ; and when, in order to try him, he stopped a moment, the man made a significant movement towards his rifle. There was, therefore, nothing to do but to wait. By way of shortening the time, he rode forward to the waggon in which the sick man lay tossing in feverish delirium. After a moment's silence, during which he saw how untiring the missionary was in his attention to his comrade, he leaned forward and said—

“ You are very kind, pastor.”

“ He is a fellow-creature,” answered the old man simply.

“ H’m ! I thought you only looked upon him as an enemy.”

“ I have no enemies,” was the old man’s gentle rebuke.

Lieutenant Kennedy bit his lip. He did not like this submissive tone with its background of hopelessness. Both by training and nature he was a sceptic, and everything he had seen since learning to formulate an independent thought had merely served to strengthen him in his conviction that the world was ruled by self-interest alone ; and that he who was strong enough to help himself—the more ruthlessly the better—must gain in reputation and advancement, while the weak were doomed to go to the wall. He, who was rather proud of his twenty-three years’ experience, and who fully believed that every good action was thrown away, was surprised at the sight of this aged apparition who seemed to belong to a past when men not only believed in the worth of sacrifices but were also able to make them. He told himself that the missionary did not fit in with his surroundings, that he was out of

harmony with all these rifles at half-cock, the snorting horses, and the silent, resolute men. The old man was a blot on the picture, and so he looked at him with that curious interest which one is always apt to feel for something new and strange, whatever it may be. He looked down upon him pitifully, like one who, knowing himself to have taken up the more practical, useful, and, consequently, the higher standpoint, looks down upon some fanatical enthusiast. "Of what use are your words and your actions?" thought this pupil of modern schools of thought. "You can change nothing by means of them; that which is to be, will be; you can only harm yourself." And he pitied the old man, but felt no inclination to begin any discussion with him.

The march continued at the same brisk pace along the bed of the stream. At the head rode several Boers with their rifles ready to shoot at a moment's notice; then followed the disarmed dragoons, with half a score of guards on either side of them; and lastly the four waggons driven by the Kaffirs, whose white teeth glittered brightly between their red lips as they shouted to the animals. Lieutenant Kennedy turned away his eyes, for the black fellow who sat laughing in the front waggon was none other than the trembling, timorous creature who had met them the previous night. About a score of men brought up the rear. There was nothing new or remarkable about the arrangement, but a feeling of uncertainty seemed to pervade the whole band, keeping every nerve at full tension. On either side the yellow banks of the river sloped upwards, and above their heads they had a strip of clear blue sky.

This monotony, which continued hour after hour, served to make the young officer reflective. He had shaken off his former thoughts as being too depressing, but their place was being constantly filled by others. He was hungry, too, but would not for anything have confessed it. He was, moreover, troubled by something new which had begun to stir in his mind. Perhaps it was this endless pursuit of an unknown goal that had begun to affect him.

He was quite certain that the fact of his being a prisoner had not perturbed his mind to any appreciable extent, and this consoled him a little. He could endure adversity, and even this—the greatest that could have befallen him in his present position—he found no difficulty in bearing somehow or other. And yet there was something that had awakened a sort of soothing sadness in his naturally hard mind, without his being able to make clear to himself what it really was.

The sick man slept heavily in spite of the fact that the waggon jolted over the stones that lay scattered all around. His chest rose and fell painfully, and he moaned as he breathed, while a look of uneasiness and agony lingered in his face. The sweat continued to break out in great drops that ran down his cheeks.

Lieutenant Kennedy was moved as he looked at him.

The missionary met his glance with a troubled look, and said slowly—

“I’m afraid it’s a bad lookout for your friend.”

“Do you think so?” asked the officer, thankful that the resumption of the conversation would relieve him of his own melancholy thoughts, rather than really apprehensive for his comrade’s fate.

“Yes; it is a bad sign that he should be able to sleep with all this clatter about him, and with all this terrible shaking.”

The lieutenant grew grave, and turned all his attention upon the patient and his nurse.

The missionary now seemed quite a different man from the preacher of the night before. With the touching tenderness of a mother he wrapped the blankets better about the sick man’s body, and himself assuming a most uncomfortable posture, he held the fevered head tenderly in his lap in order to break the jolting of the waggon. In his acute anxiety and his complete forgetfulness of self there was something so entirely benevolent that the young officer could not but be affected by it; his face, which had hitherto been so hard, became more kindly, and he said suddenly—

"Allow me, sir, to express my highest esteem for your goodness."

And with the same correctness and ceremony with which he would have saluted a lady, he touched his helmet and bowed.

The old man glanced hastily at his face, and then gazed up helplessly at the strip of sky above him. Then, with a weary gesture, he answered in a low voice—

"Words—words! Why is there always so much said and so little done? Young man, if deeds are the fruit of one's thoughts, then the seed must be of the worst."

For a moment the officer could not see the reason for the rebuke, and he turned away his head with an offended look. But immediately he regretted what he had said, for he saw the ineptitude of coming with his conventional thanks to a man who had made it his mission to help all sufferers without regard to nationality or colour, and especially without any thought of reaping any praise for his action.

The missionary looked searchingly at his face, which he now saw only in profile, and, as if divining his feelings, he continued—

"We human beings are indeed wonderful creatures, are we not? Everywhere we hear good praised, everywhere the right way is pointed out; and yet what do we do? We readily join in the chorus of jubilation, but we lumber along carelessly in the old wheel-ruts, without having the strength to break with worn-out prejudices. Why is it that we so seldom do what we should?"

The young man looked down at him, and shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Words—words!" the missionary repeated. "'They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick.' Can you tell me if there is anyone who is *well*? No, they are soon counted. Everywhere one meets the man who has lost the light of his eyes, but who nevertheless boasts of his ability to see. Well, he does see—the blindness of others, for all of us fumble about in the dark. And yet there is light to be found, although it is the one

thing we refuse to see; and all the time mankind are sighing, through anxious nights and everlasting days, for that which alone can heal their maladies.” He paused a moment, and then went on in a warmer tone: “The best way in which the modern man can prove his health is to sneer at those who point out the way of freedom from the slavery of habit. You must scoff, young man; you must not feel gratitude, for then your path would be hard to follow.” And, ending as he began, he repeated: “Words—words; to the hungry they offer stones! Words—words!”

One of the Boers behind them left the group and rode forward to the waggons.

“Are you not tired, Oom?”¹ he asked in a friendly tone.

“Oh no,” came the answer cheerfully.

“No?” said the other slowly. “Still, if you have no objection, let me take your place and see after the poor fellow.”

“Well—thank you, my friend; I really do need to stretch my legs a bit.”

And, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the Boer slipped down from his saddle, climbed into the waggon, and settled down with the sick man’s head on his knees, while the old man lay down beside him. But before stretching himself out to rest he turned apologetically to the lieutenant, who had witnessed the incident with a mingled feeling of humiliation and ill-will, and said—

“I am no longer so strong as I was; my legs soon get benumbed.”

Without answering a word, the officer spurred his horse so savagely that it reared, and was with difficulty restrained from dashing off at full speed. It was his duty to look after his own countryman, yet not for a moment had it occurred to him to offer his help. From the old man’s apologetic expression he could see that he had had no wish whatever to give him a lesson; but it was, perhaps, just for

¹ Uncle: a friendly way of addressing elderly people among the Boers.

that reason that a deep flush overspread the lieutenant's face.

Some fifty paces farther on the sluit made a bend at right angles to the west, and there the vanguard halted. The waggons came to a standstill, the men dismounted to stretch their stiff limbs, and provisions were produced for a hasty meal. In vain did the lieutenant cudgel his brains to discover the purpose of this long ride, which had been undertaken in such haste. But as no reason for it was apparent, he abandoned himself to the pleasure of a short rest, for everything tended to indicate that it could not be long. He had not guessed wrongly, for ten minutes after the halt the field-cornet arrived at the head of twenty men. They had covered the column's left flank, and now they came riding down the sluit at a pace that showed they considered every moment precious.

As soon as they had come to a halt, the whole band flocked round them, and one asked shortly—

“Well?”

“At least three hundred,” answered Van der Nath slowly.

“How far away?”

“Two miles this side of the kopjes near the German's farm.”

“That's about three miles as the crow flies,” explained one man who seemed to know the district.

“Just about,” said the field-cornet.

A shrill whistle was heard on the right of the sluit, and two men came riding from that direction.

All waited patiently until they had descended the bank. Then a shower of questions assailed the new-comers.

“Nothing,” they both answered together; “to the east the way is open.”

The whole band seemed now to know the situation, and all continued their interrupted repast.

Without anyone trying to prevent him, Lieutenant Kennedy had heard what had been said, and had obtained a perfectly clear idea of the situation.

That Van der Nath and his men knew the whereabouts

of some English detachment could be seen from the questions and answers that had been exchanged ; but he was by no means so sure that the English, on their part, had any knowledge that a Boer force was in their neighbourhood. To judge by the men's easy demeanour this was not the case, and this irritated him greatly, for it lessened the prospects of his early liberation.

After about a quarter of an hour, when the meal, of which the prisoners had partaken plentifully, had come to an end, the men gathered round the missionary's waggon, and there began something which to the lieutenant seemed a laughable parody of a council of war. All took part in it, everyone taking it as a matter of course that he should ; everyone stated his opinion, and the leader himself was outvoiced. It was decided to leave the sluit and make for the karoo,¹ and, if it should be necessary, spend the whole night in the saddle.

"I think, all the same, that we should go eastwards," said the field-cornet reluctantly. "In that direction none of the 'rooneks' have shown themselves."

"But that is a roundabout way—about seventy miles," put in the spokesman of the majority, a young fellow who was almost a boy. "The horses have already done as much as they can stand for to-day," he added.

"True enough," admitted the chief ; "but what will it matter if we join our main body a couple of days later than we counted upon. If we go east we can make shorter day-marches and rest each night."

"That's true enough, too," said an old Boer, stroking his beard thoughtfully ; but we are tired of scampering about like madmen over kopjes and karoos ; we would rather join the commandant and then have a proper rest. Both man and beast want that, for this trip has been pretty hard."

"The straightest way is the shortest," added the young man lightly.

"Yes," said the one who had just spoken, "and the rooneks we saw to the west are probably those we saw this

¹ The sandy heath in South Africa.

morning. Like us, they have been in the saddle the whole day, and if I know them aright their horses are in no condition for racing. We can easily put a couple of miles between them and us, so why should we trouble ourselves about them?"

"But they are ahead of us!" said Van der Nath impatiently.

"Where are they, then?"

"North-west of this. Huys saw a big dust-cloud in the direction of the German's abandoned farm."

"It might have been cattle."

"It was the English."

"As you are so sure of it, we can very well swing round a little to the east and go round them," said the old Boer, whose dry, shrivelled skin showed that he must long have passed the age when a man is fit for hard riding or for handling a rifle. There he stood, a fine type of hardy, open-air humanity; and as he stroked his beard and blinked at the sun with his small bloodshot eyes, he remarked, with the air of one uttering an incontestable argument—

"It is just these long roundabout ways that knock up the horses."

"Oom Jan is right," said two approving voices.

The field-cornet seemed unwilling to give in, and looked towards the missionary as if seeking help from him, but the latter was busy with the sick man, and did not hear what was going on close beside him.

"If we go straight ahead that means coming against the enemy," muttered the field-cornet, looking beseechingly at the men, as if seeking to persuade them to come over to his side.

"Then the guns must speak," said old Jan shortly.

"But they are more than us this time, Oom van Gracht."

"They will be fewer afterwards," laughed the young man easily, and the old man nodded approvingly.

It appeared that there were two parties represented: the cautious, who would reluctantly resign themselves to a long ride and just as reluctantly seek battle; and the

impetuous, who would prefer a fight for life or death to anything. Strangely enough, it was the oldest and the youngest who took the latter view, and they maintained it so hotly that, in the end, the men in their prime gave in to them and let them have their own way without further opposition. No doubt the fear of appearing faint-hearted, which operates on such occasions, helped to bring about their submission. Anyhow, the voice of wisdom was disregarded, and one man remarked, in the quiet manner that distinguished his countrymen—

“Well, let us ride straight for the deserted farm, so that we get a good way to the east, but so that we shall not have more than a couple of miles to the pass.”

This compromise satisfied both parties; an energetic “Yes” from the whole band showed that they were all agreed.

Van der Nath, who was overruled, shrugged his shoulders and said—

“Well, then, in Heaven’s name, let us take the shortest way !”

The conference was at an end, and those who had taken the successful part in it dispersed, visibly satisfied at having had their own way. That fighting was in all likelihood imminent troubled no one; all were heartily tired of the wearying roaming about, and were now satisfied to risk anything in order to get some rest the sooner. Their reconnoitring had now lasted six days and nights; they had learnt nearly all they wanted to know, and they longed to get back to headquarters, which they now expected to do after one day’s march such as had been decided upon. A fight—well, most of them scarcely knew what that really was, but they considered themselves bound in honour not to betray anything like fear. So, as every man went off to attend to his duties, old Jan van Gracht patted the shoulder of the young man who, next to himself, had taken the most prominent part in the short council of war, and uttered a few words of commendation that gained general approval and brought a flush of pleasure to the young man’s cheek.

Now that it was too late to intervene, the missionary saw what had been decided upon, and signed to Van der Nath to approach.

"Abraham," he said impressively, "remember your promise!"

"I know; but I gave the commandant another promise, and the first promise has first claim. But as soon as I have fulfilled it I am free."

He drew a deep breath, and looked at the old man in a way that showed how glad he was to have come to an understanding with himself.

The insight into the Boer character which the last half-hour had given him, caused Lieutenant Kennedy to bend his head in thought. He now saw that the missionary was quite right when he said that the two peoples, whom an unkind fate had opposed to each other, had little or no knowledge of each other's good points. But in every war it is the same: strangers set against strangers, who have no fault to find with each other except their different nationality. And yet it is precisely in its nationality that each is entitled to pride itself. The well-protected barriers with which every State endeavours to surround itself, prevent even neighbours from believing the testimony of their own eyes; and something that is called patriotism, but is often nothing else than weakness and distrust, is utilised to make their ignorance of each other greater; while those who fan the flames refuse to see the danger to which they thereby expose their country.

"To horse!" shouted the field-cornet in a loud voice that roused the young officer from his meditations.

The men obeyed at once. The bundles of fodder were slung into the waggons, the provisions were stowed away, the whips cracked, and, after scouts had been sent out in all directions to support those who were already out, the troop began to move. The column made its way up the slope from the *sluit* and was soon out upon the *karoo*, which stretched all around as far as the eye could reach. Now for the first time they could see what an immense distance they had put behind them since the morning.

Nothing could now be seen of the billowy kopjes between which they had journeyed until midday ; on the great even plain over which they now rode could be seen only two hills rising side by side like shadows far away to the north-west.

In accordance with his decision to make every possible use of his position as prisoner, Lieutenant Kennedy did not allow even the simplest detail to escape his observation. The order of march did not interest him, but the Boer system of scouting interested him greatly. The speed of the detachment increased by degrees ; in spite of the long day's ride the small Boer ponies seemed as fresh as ever, while the mounts of the Englishmen began to stumble and hang their heads.

A magic glow lay over the red karoo with its sparse vegetation ; the crests of the kopjes shone as if illumined by fire ; while a reddish-violet tint covered the slopes which lay in the shadow.

The officer rode forward to the dragoons and kept beside them for a time. But their thoughtless talk with those of their captors who spoke English annoyed him, and he fell back and rode beside the waggon in which his sick comrade lay in delirium, raving about the war and the bloodshed that it caused. To-day everything seemed to conspire to make him dejected and bitter at heart. There the tall fellow sat immovable, holding the sick man's head on his knees, while his friendly, childlike eyes looked up at him as if to say, "As long as I am here, there is no danger." His expression showed that he had undertaken this task more for the missionary's than the sick man's sake, and to Lieutenant Kennedy the thought was a comfort—why, he could not exactly tell. And, ready at any moment to take his place, the old man lay at his side, peeling a water-melon, a piece of which he would from time to time place in the mouth of the patient, who eagerly sucked the vanilla-flavoured fruit, though, like a naughty child, he would sometimes swallow it and sometimes reject it.

The young lieutenant looked dreamily out over the red

sandy plain, the monotony of which was only broken from time to time by a karoo-shrub sticking up out of the sand or, here and there, the pale, sickly shoots of a milk-bush. Strange thoughts arose in his mind, and to keep them at a distance he had to muster all his strength of will. Yet he was not entirely successful. He found himself making concessions of which, only a few days before, he would have been ashamed, and his own "stupid weakness," as he called it, exasperated him. But now that he was able to study the men about him—and that from a standpoint so different from his former point of view—he could not but curse the duty that bade him hate and harry that simple people, to kill them, even, should an opportunity occur.

Suddenly he pulled up his horse, and shook his head as if to rid himself of something. Then he pulled himself together again and rode on; he had absolutely decided that he would not allow himself to think. And why should not he do like everyone else, like all who preferred to live and take life as it came. That, at least, was more comfortable than worrying over its problems. He felt sure that he had chosen wisely: he would not break with his past; and still less did he mean to sacrifice his future for the sake of whims called forth by feelings that must vanish as soon as he got back to his right place.

CHAPTER IV

WAR

“**A**T this rate we shall reach Koopman’s Kraal before sundown,” said the field-cornet.

“Shall we halt there, or push on farther at once?” asked Van Gracht, whose rank seemed to be equivalent to that of a non-commissioned officer.

“I don’t know yet; we shall see.” And Van der Nath raised himself in his stirrup, and gave a shrill whistle that could be heard far around.

While the sound seemed yet in the air a man came galloping towards him from the patrol on the west flank.

“You, Pieter, and Oom Jan, and Zimmer—his horse will stand anything, wont it?”

The man nodded.

“Good! You three will ride on ahead, about two miles to the west of Koopman’s Kraal, and see if any of the rooneks are about there. But keep your eyes open. You will meet us either at the deserted farm or behind it; we shall hardly get as far as the two kopjes.”

Pieter nodded again, and laughingly showing his white teeth asked—

“May we shoot?”

“Not if there are many.”

“Then I hope there won’t be too many.”

He beckoned to the other Boer, whose fair skin and frank eyes betrayed his pure Germanic origin, and accompanied by Jan van Gracht, who assumed command by right of age, they galloped westward. All spurred their horses to their utmost speed, for they were pleased with

the orders that had been given them, and within half an hour they were out of sight.

Meanwhile the others rode steadily forward, their rifles slung across their backs, and the inevitable pipe hanging from their lips. Not a word was spoken except among the captive dragoons, who were philosophically making the best of their fate.

At one moment Van der Nath was some distance ahead of his men and at another among the rearguard. He was troubled by a slight uneasiness, which showed itself in his constant attempts to press the pace. At length he seemed to find it intolerable to have no one to talk to, and he rode up close to the missionary. For a time he rode in silence beside the waggon. Then, without any preliminary introduction, he said—

“I’m afraid we are going to stick our heads into a wasp’s nest.”

“Have you any reason for thinking so, my friend?” asked the old man.

The field-cornet cast a hasty side-glance at Lieutenant Kennedy, whose proximity troubled him.

“Nothing for certain,” he said hesitatingly, “and that is just it. A mile west of the sluit we saw fresh tracks of horses. At latest they must have ridden by three hours before we came to the bend. Now, the question is whether they have crossed the ravine and continued to the north-west. If so”—

He stopped and shook his head as if displeased.

“And if so?” repeated the missionary.

“Then they will come out near Koopman’s Kraal about the same time as ourselves, and as our horses are already knocked up there is not much chance of our being able to get away from them.”

“And if they have not crossed the ravine?”

“Then we have already outridden them, and there is no danger.”

“And what else, my friend?”

“Nothing. We must go this way now. For one thing it saves us a two days’ march, and for another I have sent

on young Huys, Zimmer, and Jan to reconnoitre. If they don't meet us at the kraal, who knows what may have befallen them?"

"You think, then, that there will be fighting?"

"Yes, but that is of less consequence. If the rooneks have not occupied the pass between the two kopjes to the north of the kraal, I will undertake with fifty men to hold them in check for a whole day."

"Bloodshed, and yet more bloodshed!" sighed the old man. "When is this going to end?"

"Don't ask me," answered the field-cornet gloomily. "I do my duty; let everyone do his."

"Duty?" repeated the missionary bitterly, turning to him and to Lieutenant Kennedy; "is there any word that has been more abused than that? And what sorry comfort your duty brings you both, differently as you fulfil it! Oh, we men! we men! From every pulpit in every land is preached the message of brotherly love, and immediately we have left the church we go and violate that which has given us such wonderful comfort. And why do we violate it? Because 'duty' bids us. We should never do each other any wrong were it not that duty forced us to it. How many kinds of duty are there? There is one that bids us kill, and one that bids us heal the wounded. Which is the right one? You, who come from the island beyond the sea, have statesmen whose duty it is to let blood flow in streams; and here you meet a people whose duty it also is to wound and kill. How can these two peoples name the word 'duty' without feeling the sting of conscience? 'Duty!'"—his old body trembled with suppressed grief, and almost inaudibly he whispered, "'Duty, duty, duty!'" He looked up, and there was such inexpressible sorrow in his eyes that the listeners turned away their faces. He shrugged his shoulders with an air of hopelessness, and, turning aside, gave all his attention to the sick man, who kept muttering words that were unintelligible, mingled with often-repeated orders to an imaginary troop of horse to charge with all their might.

"Well, who is right?" said Van der Nath at length with a sigh. "Who knows?"

The lieutenant had been annoyed and gnawed his moustache. When he saw, however, how the other had received the old missionary's outburst he said with a laugh—

"'What is truth?' as Pilate once asked. Probably even he meant to do his duty on that historic occasion."

And without suspecting what a self-destructive piece of criticism he had uttered, he rode on unconcernedly.

The field-cornet looked depressed, but as he had other things to think about, the conversation was not resumed.

The sharp ride across the karoo continued without interruption. Already the sun's rays fell obliquely, and the two kopjes, which appeared to be the goal of the troop, cast broad shadows before them.

Van der Nath spurred his horse and rode to the front. Here he stopped and shaded his eyes with his hand, but, strain them as he would, he could discern nothing to indicate the presence of any other human beings than themselves. Suddenly the crack of a rifle far away to the north fell upon the men's ears, causing them in their surprise to rein in their horses and stop short. Within about ten seconds nearly the entire band had gathered round their leader.

"That was Jan's rifle," said one of the men in a low tone.

"That meant death to one roonek," observed another slowly.

All gazed eagerly across the karoo to see if they could discover anything, but as far as the eye could reach the sunlit plain lay desolated and bare.

"There is a sluit over yonder," said one man who knew the district.

"How far off?" asked another.

"Two miles at most, but I don't remember exactly."

"And how many miles is it from here to the deserted kraal?" asked the field-cornet.

"About the same distance."

"We must get there. It was Jan who fired; he wanted

to warn us. The rooneks are hidden in the sluit. Well, there they can stay! We don't mean to go that way. We did well to keep to the right of the German's farm. Now we are nearer to it than the English, but all the same we must put our horses to their best pace."

He gave a shrill whistle, which seemed to cut through the air like a bullet and was prolonged an unusual time.

The scouts who were about a mile distant on either flank at once turned their horses and came galloping back. The man on the left flank had scarcely proceeded a hundred yards before a shout came simultaneously from a score of throats—

“There!—Look! There they are!”

Suddenly, as if they had been thrown up by an earthquake, a troop of mounted infantry appeared some three miles off, and with loosened rein came charging after the Boers.

“Forward!” shouted the field-cornet. And with frantic haste horsemen and waggons dashed over the karoo, sending the red dust whirling in clouds high above the ground.

Van der Nath now saw that his suppositions were correct. The enemy's force, which at a glance he estimated to be composed of at least 300 men, had been concealed at the bottom of the sluit. One of their patrols had probably discovered the three Boer scouts, and had concluded from their movements that the force to which they belonged would take the same direction. They had, therefore, allowed them to pass unmolested. Consequently the English had sought cover, and had found an excellent hiding-place in the dried-up river-bed, where they had awaited the Boer troop. But, finding that their enemy kept two miles to the west of the sluit, they soon saw that a surprise was out of the question. So, trusting to their greater numerical strength, they had mounted and given chase.

For about twenty minutes nothing was heard but the laboured panting of the horses, the creaking of the waggon-wheels, and the encouraging cries of the men whenever any of the animals stumbled. Suddenly the monotony of

the plain was broken by the appearance of the half-ruined walls of a farm. The first building, which was built of red brick, was long and rectangular; the thatched roof had long since rotted away, and such remains of it as had not yet been dispersed by the wind lay strewn all over a disorderly farmyard. Behind the dwelling-house stood an empty cowshed, surrounded by a low stone wall, while in the centre of the enclosure were a sheep-pen and a couple of deserted Kaffir huts.

As the last of the Boers swang round the corner of the main building and crowded in through the gateway, about a dozen bullets struck against the wall behind them, dislodging some portions of the brick, which flew about the ears of the rearguard.

The pursuing force had seen the impossibility of overtaking the Boer column in the short distance that separated them from the protecting walls of the farm. They had therefore opened fire at long range, without, however, doing much damage.

Panting painfully after their sharp race, the horses were placed in the sheep-pen, the high and comparatively solid walls of which sufficed to protect them from the enemy's rifle fire. The prisoners were ordered to sit in the rear between the waggons, under the custody of five men. All this was done with a rapidity that showed that every moment was precious. Meanwhile the rest of the Boers crept inside the ruined farm. They spread themselves all over it, seeking cover behind the blocks of stone and structural projections, and awaited that which—after such a threatening prelude—was sure to follow.

The Boers had entirely vanished. It seemed as if the ground had swallowed them up. Had it not been for the khaki-clad men who hesitatingly took up their position on the karoo, there would have been nothing to disturb the tranquillity of nature's richly coloured picture. The long shadows cast by the scrub and the stones indicated that sunset might be expected within an hour, and the attacking force well knew that once darkness fell the Boers might consider themselves safe for this time.

The defenders stood immovable at their posts. A hush of expectation filled the air. Even the horses pricked up their ears as if they felt instinctively that something unusual was about to happen.

Of all the men whom an unkind fate had brought together on that sunlit plain, there was not one who had ever seen his adversary before. Individually, they had nothing to blame each other with ; they worshipped the same God, were of the same race and colour, and under any other conditions would have met as friends. Yet in spite of all this they felt for each other only hate, and were prepared to take each other's lives. They waited impatiently, their lips tightly compressed, and a cold, determined expression in their eyes, each man's finger on the trigger of his rifle.

The English force had retired, and from their hiding-place the Boers could see them leading their horses back to the sluit, while a company formed into firing line and began advancing rapidly over the plain. As yet they did not attempt to seek cover, for the long distance that still separated them from their enemy made them feel comparatively secure ; they advanced at a sharp pace, stopping occasionally to discharge a volley. A mass of small dust-clouds showed where some of the bullets struck the ground ; others came whistling over the walls of the farm, only a few of them striking the wall itself from time to time.

The Boers remained still and did not reply, and, encouraged by their persistent silence, the advancing line moved forward another hundred yards. Then one of the finest shots among the Boers raised his rifle, took aim, and fired.

One of the men in khaki stretched out his arms as if to embrace someone, staggered a few paces to one side, and fell heavily to the earth. There he lay, a greyish-yellow speck on the dark plain. The whole line seemed to start ; the officer in command shouted something and flourished his sword, and the men threw themselves flat on their faces, so that from the farm only their helmets could be seen.

"Sight for a thousand yards!" was the next order given by the commanding officer, who alone remained standing, to ensure that everything was properly done.

On the other side, this was taken as a challenge, and a volley was discharged. The officer doubled up as if he had been cut in two, and fell.

Two men sprang up to carry him away, and immediately more shots were heard.

Another man fell.

And yet another.

How often have these words been repeated in books and newspaper reports, and how often have millions of thoughtless eyes glanced at them indifferently, without the readers feeling anything but a cold shudder of dismal gratification! Old men and young, immature boys and women, have let their eyes rest upon them without giving them a thought; and just because the words have been repeated so often—and not as a fact to be deplored—it has come to be the general conviction that it cannot be helped, that it must be so.

Another man fell.

If those who created the occasions for war instead of removing them could but have seen the consequences of their actions, they would perhaps have reflected more than once before taking the decisive step. But their honour bade them not to reflect; their duty commanded them to act as they did. And over a whole country are spread descriptions of stormy scenes in Parliament and in the streets; glowing accounts of the ardent enthusiasm that inspired the people's representatives as they registered their momentous decision are despatched to every corner of the globe, and are read with beating hearts and burning eyes.

... And the inevitable happens.

And no one dreams that there is also another honour, which consists in being humane; and the duty which bids us love one another is forgotten in the intoxication of the moment. And men who think it almost a crime to doubt their religious sincerity make no scruple about voting in

cold blood the funds for carrying on a war. Hundreds of thousands of thoughtless people praise their courage ; and a whole nation—their fellow-countrymen, whom they have doomed to countless privations and nameless sufferings, to ruin and death—exalts their heroism. Can that be courage which consists in going with the current ? Can that be heroism which consists in saying what others have said ?

Another man fell.

One human being, a stranger—whether friend or foe—is gone ; that is all. A few hundred yards away a life is extinguished, a life which might perhaps have been useful to many others, and which certainly was dear to some one. A stranger has killed a stranger. Probably the perpetrator knows nothing of it ; his pulse beats, his temples throb, and he is carried away with the excitement and din around him, and by the dread that whispers in his ear, “ Kill or be killed—choose which it shall be ! ” He follows the same dark instinct as the men in Parliament, the only difference being that the result of his act follows immediately, although it is not so great and so far-reaching. He takes his aim and fires uninterruptedly, feeling a savage joy in reducing the enemy’s numbers. He no longer thinks, his bloodshot eyes flash with triumph, his nerves no longer tremble with fear, for he has become accustomed to the din, the roar, and the death-cries. He will avenge his wounded comrades, his fallen countrymen ; he will pay in the same coin.

“ Kill or be killed ! ” The words ring in his ears like a knell ; and he kills. From time to time he eats and sleeps, like the others. He has grown so accustomed to scenes of horror that, from a good man, he is transformed into a bloodthirsty savage beast. All that is wicked and unlovely, all that was hidden in the unknown depths of a blameless character, is now brought to the surface. He laughs at a lucky shot ; he makes merry when many fall and are annihilated. He has become a first-rate fighting man, and is made much of by all. The human butcher is honoured, and becomes famous, he is decorated so that

people shall see it ; and with hands still reeking with the warm blood of human beings he embraces the wife of his bosom and caresses the rosy cheeks of his little ones.

Do not ask, Why ? The answer is always the same. It must be so !

Another man fell.

Far away, in a land beyond the sea, a woman is kneeling in a church, alone. She prays unceasingly, passionately. Her lips tremble with suffering, her hands are clenched so tightly that, as she wrings them in the anguish of her mind, the nails eat into her flesh. She calls upon the name of God, but more often in her prayers it is a man's name that she utters. And when she has exhausted herself with weeping and eased the fulness of her heart, she goes out with uplifted head among the people. The agony that rends her inmost soul is unbearable, but nevertheless she carries her head high. She herself scarcely knows why, but her instinct tells her that the world expects it of her. And they whisper to each other—

“ Her husband is out at the war ; he is fighting for his country ; she stays at home, alone with her two children. Isn't she a brave woman ? ”

And the men lift their hats to her, saying that they respect the stiff mask she wears over her face, that they admire her bearing. But of her soul's agony they do not speak.

And again, in the secrecy of her chamber, she weeps and prays, lamenting that which she knows cannot be otherwise.

Another man fell.

Every evening an old man sits shut up in his room. Day after day, month after month, he sits waiting in restless anxiety. He is a Christian, like many others, in name. Every year he gives large sums of money to charitable institutions ; he gives freely, but from calculation, for giving brings him respect and brings with it certain social advantages. One day, in a fit of what he, with bitter scorn, calls patriotism, he gave the best that he possessed—

his only son. The young man went forth willingly ; the old man got a big contract for the army. He reckoned up the profit in advance, and rejoiced in the bigness of the sum ; but now he rues the whole transaction, and bitterly bemoans his lot every evening, asking himself whether his son will be killed, whether he will come home maimed and unfit for useful work.

He cannot tell, and he is rent in twain by an anguish that is unspeakable. He writhes with the stinging pain ; he sees visions, and his hair stands on end with terror, for his overwrought fancy creates pictures that stream with blood. "There !" he cries ; "a man is down ! It is my poor, dear boy—shot by the enemy ! He is not dead, though —only wounded ! He is lying there waiting for the ambulance-bearers to see him, to venture through the rain of bullets and bear his useless body away. His parched throat burns like a red-hot iron. His blood—*my* blood !" shrieks the old merchant, "is spilt out upon the sand of a foreign land ! The lad suffers the torments of the damned ; he calls his mother's name ; he raises his feeble hands to heaven, but his prayer is unheard !"

At the sight of his son lying there alone and forgotten the old man breaks out in a cold sweat and wrings his hands. The boy is more dead than alive ; he has lost hope ; his bloodless lips stammer incoherent words asking for mercy ; he implores death to free him, for death seems to have no time to spend compassion upon him, having so much to do elsewhere. The father's eyes distend with horror. . . . His son has now lain there for two whole days and nights. He is not dead yet, but neither is he alive. The worms crawl about in the wound which his frenzied fingers have torn open afresh, so that the new pain shall deaden the old. The once strong, fine fellow is now a strange, unrecognisable mass. . . . And again the sun rises after a cold, damp, sad, weary night. This is the third day . . . and he is not dead yet—not yet ! And round about not a single living soul is to be seen—nothing but a fat, ruffled vulture that is waiting patiently until the last feeble spasms in the living body shall cease.

The old man's head is bathed in cold sweat ; he is stiff with dread, and with trembling lips he stammers forth the first prayer he has prayed since he was a child : "Lord Jesus in heaven !—it is not much I ask—only let him die—die—die !"

Next day he too wears the mask, without which he does not dare show himself to the world ; and, after pressing his cold, fleshless hands, his business friends say to one another—

"An excellent man ! The country needs many such as he ! An example !"

The old man laughs bitterly within him when he hears them, and thinks of the coming night.

Another man fell.

A young girl is dancing at a subscription ball, the proceeds of which—after expenses have been deducted—are to be devoted to the sick and wounded in the war. She was very loth to come, but when they made her understand that her absence would be misunderstood, seeing that her betrothed is at the front, she yielded. She affects indifference, makes believe to be happy, and dances because the world expects her to show a good example. She, too, knows that she wears a mask, but she is beginning to be accustomed to it. She laughs merrily, and feels flattered when she hears them say of her : "Look, she takes things in the right way. When one thinks how fond they are of each other, it is really wonderful !" She laughs again, inwardly strengthened by such praise, and goes on until the end of the ball.

But when she reaches home, she buries her face in her pillow, and sobs as if her heart would break. Is he dead or alive ? Is he sick, or . . . ? No, no ! . . . no, . . . perhaps. . . . She would rather not think, only hope ; but that is just what she cannot do. But she dares not cry any more : her eyes would become red and dim, her fresh complexion would be spoilt, and she dares not show herself thus before others. With an heroic effort she drives back her tears, and forces herself to wear a stereotyped smile of vacancy.

She grows pale and thin, and her eyes shine as if with fever. She has fits of hysteria, but the doctor can find no reasonable cause for her illness, for her smile deceives him. Meanwhile she has but one wish—to give free vent to her tears ; but she smiles and laughs incessantly, suffering unspeakably in secret for thus violating her nature.

Her fears prove unnecessary, for her lover suddenly returns. He has one leg maimed. The cripple is moved by the girl's affectionate reception of him ; he sees his beloved with the same eyes as half a year before, when he went away. He marries the half-tortured hysterical woman, and the wedding-guests whisper to each other : "How beautiful ! In these dark times a romance like this is needed to help one to maintain one's courage !"

But about the wretched weaklings of children, the fruit of this beautiful marriage, no one concerns himself. That they lack strength for the struggle for existence is the affair of their parents. These, indeed, make themselves wretched for their children's sakes, but to no purpose. The father becomes a hypochondriac ; the mother goes into a lunatic asylum, and when she dies there is a suppressed whisper among the mourners : "So sad that the little ones are ailing ; before their engagement the parents were the finest couple you could imagine !"

And then they comfort the widower with the crippled leg, telling him that he has done his duty, as a brave man should—that that is an inheritance which not everyone can leave to his children.

"Duty !" exclaims the maimed man, seizing hold of the clergyman's gown. "Tell me, sir, how can a righteous God exact retribution upon the children for their parents' misdeeds, when they know that they have done their duty ?"

The clergyman stammers something about there being some mistake somewhere. "But," interrupts the father quickly, "look at those weakly children. Is the fault theirs ? No ! Then where does it lie ? With the woman whose nerves were ruined while I was contracting an incurable disease in a wretched barrack ? Or where ?—

where?" And as he gets no reply he bids the guests depart, for he is burning with rage. As they turn away he shouts after them in despair: "I did my duty, and now three innocent ones have to suffer for it!" But as he is known to be a hypochondriac, the only effect of his words is to excite pity for the weak, sickly children, whose lot it shall be to be brought up by such a blasphemer!

Another man fell.

He was a worthy mechanic, she a sprightly servant girl. Like other people they got married, and, like other people, supported themselves by working with their hands. A child was born to them and became their joy. They solemnly vowed that it should have all the good things that life had denied to them. With this object they worked doubly hard—with their utmost strength—for before them shone the rosy dawn of the future, and everything looked so wondrously fair. The little one lying in its cradle made them see life in a new light. Everything now was easy; they would accomplish anything.

And then the war broke out.

He became restless, and began to frequent the tavern. He drank, read the newspapers, and began doing things which under ordinary circumstances would never have entered his head. Then one evening he came home drunk; he had chosen this way of working up his courage to say what had long been on his mind. He had gone over every word he had intended to say, repeating it to himself several times in order to imprint it on his memory. The liquor helped him to see everything in a more rosy light, and now he felt sure of being able to say it. But as soon as he had crossed the threshold of his house, he found himself unable to open his mouth. He had forgotten the lesson he had learned so well.

His wife saw that there was something on his mind, and asked him what it was, encouraging him to speak out. She rued it all her life afterwards.

"It's ridiculous," he said, "that I shouldn't have been

able to say it before, though I have some pluck, too. But now you have helped me on my way, and I'm glad of it. I'm going to the war!"

"But—you know—of course—that I—I carry our second child under my heart!" stammered his astonished wife.

"And that's just why!" he answered eagerly; for, having once begun, the rest came easily. "The country expects every one to do his duty. I must go and fight!"

"But"— And she spoke passionately, as only a frightened woman can speak; she spoke of their poverty, her expectations, and many other things.

He laughed at her fears and talked gaily on, telling her the names of acquaintances who had already gone out, hinting vaguely at the glory that always belongs to the brave; so that at last he half-succeeded in appeasing her.

"Do you think," he urged finally, "that the country will not help a soldier's wife—that Government won't see to a soldier's little children? Be easy! In six months I shall be back with a medal for valour on my breast, and all my savings shall be yours. That will be something to fall back upon! With it we shall be able to give the little fellow over there, and the one we have yet to see, a proper education; they shall have a chance of learning something, they shall. Isn't all that worth some exertion?"

And she allowed herself to be consoled by his assurances—another thing which she rued to the end of her days.

He enlisted, and they parted. When the steamer that was to carry the regiment to the seat of war put to sea, she stood on the quay among hundreds of other women who, laughing and crying by turns, waved their farewells to husbands and brothers. Then she went home, waited, and bore her child.

Neither she nor her husband knew any more than most people what war is, nor did they ever get to know. He died of dysentery shortly after disembarking, and was buried with a dozen others and forgotten. She waited six months and some weeks.

As soon as she had recovered from her confinement she went with a child in each arm to a charitable organisation, which distributed food and clothing to poor soldiers' wives. She did not get much, as those among whom it had to be divided were many, and were scattered over the whole country. But life is tenacious, and she wished to live until her husband came back with the medal for valour on his breast, and his untouched pay rattling in his pocket. She was perhaps no better off than her husband, far away in a foreign land ; but she waited patiently, hungering often, but still managing to keep life together. But her strength had failed, and there was no work to be found, at least not for her. Her baby became ill from want of nourishment, for she could not afford to follow the parish doctor's orders. Things had to go on as best they might, and they did.

One day the list of those receiving assistance was revised, and those who could not prove that their relatives were still fighting for their country were turned away. She found herself in the latter category. It was not more than eight months since her husband had gone out to the front. That night she went hungry to bed, without a crumb or bread in the house for herself or her children.

“Mother, give me something to eat,” wailed the elder child.

It was now that she began to rue her lot, but that did not serve to mend matters.

Then she was cast out of her little garret, for her furniture had all been pawned right and left to pay small debts. The usual story of destitution and misery was enacted in all its sorrowful details. She stood powerless and helpless, not daring to resist her fate. With fevered blood she paced street after street for a whole day, feeling ashamed of her position, though why she should be she could not tell. And that only increased her shame still more. Of relatives she had none in that great city, and her acquaintances—well, they were only just able to help themselves. She begged, first for work—of any sort whatever—then for a copper to buy bread. But hands like hers were stretched

out everywhere ; everywhere were heard the piteous voices of those who were compelled to beg, for there were thousands of destitute soldiers' wives, and thrice as many wailing children. There was great distress throughout the land ; the givers hardened their hearts because the war lasted so long, and those who cried the loudest were the first to be helped. Those who tried to hide their distress got nothing. She was one of those who kept silent—from pride, she fancied, but really from remorse.

For many nights she slept in doorways or on waste ground ; then she threw in her lot with a man who had deserted his wife and children. She shared his lodging, for she was cold and starving, and life is precious. Now and then he would bring her some odds and ends of food. She soon accustomed herself to drink bad spirits, pilfered here and there, and became thoroughly depraved, for nothing demoralises like need, and now her family ties were all broken. She laid her crying little ones in a corner, and wandered about among the public-houses by the docks, to see if she could sell herself for a few coppers that she might get bread for her children. She forgot her husband the soldier, but she did not forget her remorse.

When she returned to him the man used to give her a drink from the bottle with the clear liquor that burned so as to deaden her pain, that brought oblivion for the moment and heightened the anguish of her mind afterwards. One day it happened that the man struck her little boy. Then she went her way, and once more stood at the street corners with a child on each arm.

She made a last effort to obtain help, but she had no papers to prove her right to public funds. She was plainly a wretched, fallen drunkard, and no one believed her. That she had lost her papers was a deplorable accident, but no one had time to remedy it. Greater interests were now at stake ; she was only one among many, and was thrust aside.

She, who had been a merry young girl and the honourable wife of a good man, sank as low as a human being can sink. She beat her children when she was intoxicated,

and kissed them in her sober moments. She fretted until she was sick at heart—fretted herself almost to death. Like a wounded animal she hid herself from the light of day, wandering out only at nightfall in search of scraps of food, and coming back to her lair drunk. As she fell asleep she heard her little ones crying for food; when she awoke she heard the same thing. She was as lonely as any unfortunate can be in a great city, and, abandoned and outcast as she was, she brooded constantly over her adversity and her gnawing remorse.

One morning she wondered why her little ones did not cry and whine as usual. The younger one had starved to death while she slept, and the other one had no longer strength enough to cry. She became desperate, as only a mother can, and, taking the living and the dead child, one in each arm, she went out among the people with the thought of showing them the bitterness of her distress. But no one had any time to look at her. The thundering of cannon filled the air, and flags were flying in all the streets. Bands were playing, and all the people were in a holiday mood. Four battalions had just landed after having done good service in the war. Dazed and wondering, she steadied herself against a wall; she had not strength to shout so that her voice might be heard in the general din. There she stood with the living and the dead in her tired arms, comprehending nothing, the noise of the thousands of voices seeming to her a malicious scoffing at her and her children. She was ill from want of food; her throat was parched with thirst so that she could not even sob; a mist came over her eyes, and fever clouded her already weakened mind. She knew that she was delirious, when she fancied she heard a voice calling to her from a distance—the voice of her husband, whom she had forgotten in her sufferings and her remorse.

“I have done my duty,” he said sternly, “but you—what have you done?”

“It isn’t too late yet,” she fancied she answered. “I feel I am going to die to-day—hunger tears me to pieces so! I feel how my boy—he is not dead yet—trembles at my

breast. Listen!—listen how his poor little pulse beats—how heavily he breathes. Do not look so reproachfully at me, husband,—I cannot help it. It was that first illness, and . . . yes, since then I have known nothing. My boy, my poor little boy—he too will soon die. Nothing can save him! And so I too will do my duty: I will set him free from all further pain."

And, while the crowd cheered and the cannon thundered, while the flags waved and the military band struck up a march, the delirious woman clenched her thin, bony fingers about the child's throat and began to strangle it.

"Oh, mother! you are hurting me!" whined the child.

"Hush! my darling. Mother only wants to do you good. It will soon be better now."

He feebly opened his eyes and looked at her questioningly. She kissed his blue lips passionately, but without abandoning her grip.

And so he also died. And while the cheers rent the air, and the band played a new piece, and the sun glittered on the many hundreds of rifles, the half-crazy, starving woman sank down beside the wall and drew her last sigh, having done for her child the only thing left in her power.

A well-dressed old gentleman who stood in front turned round from the splendid spectacle that filled the street, and looked down at the woman beside him.

"She has fainted," he said sympathetically; "probably with joy at seeing the fine fellows return."

A doctor happened to be at hand. He hastily examined her.

"Dead!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "And the children too," he added.

"Surely not with joy over—over"— The sympathetic old gentleman did not finish his sentence.

"A case of starvation," answered the doctor shortly.

And the inevitable philanthropist,—who writes long articles about human distress and receives good pay for his trouble, who collects big sums for the deserving poor and charges a good percentage for doing so, who arranges successful bazaars, the costly decorations of which would

alone suffice to rescue hundreds,—stepped forward and began to speak in a fussy, consequential tone—

“This is a deplorable case—most deplorable! But—of course—it has nothing to do with the war.”

“Who the devil said it had?” put in a working man indignantly.

Then came a man who had made himself known as one who had dared to speak the truth aloud, and he said brutally—

“This is the war!” And he pointed, not to the soldiers marching past, but to the woman and the two little ones lying on the ground. Then he added—

“War is like electricity: you use it sometimes without knowing what it is, and without thinking how it is likely to work. Once it is in full swing it annihilates everything. We have called forth war, and so now we must take the consequences. She and her children are not the only ones; they are to be met with every day.”

The crowd muttered and growled round about him, and the sympathetic old gentleman said something about unpatriotic sentiments. But all knew that what had been said was only the bare truth, although none were pleased to hear it spoken just then.

The man who had spoken smiled scornfully, and said as he went off—

“Very humane, isn’t it, to allow thousands of women and children to starve to death? But if the country were to relieve them from their misery and suffering it would not be able to afford to carry on the war, and that, of course, is much more important.”

At this moment the military band again struck up, and a deafening cheer, in which the philanthropist, the sympathetic old gentleman, the working man, and all the other spectators joined, burst forth and spread along the street. Presently two policemen came up with a stretcher to carry away the bodies. In answer to the questions addressed to them, one of them answered surlily—

“Can’t you see?—there’s been a bit of a crush!”

And the crowd, wild with joy, continued to cheer.

Another man fell, and another, and yet another—and so on to the end. They fell one by one, and they fell in heaps. Some lay still, never to rise again; others, with throbbing hearts, crept behind stones, crouched into hollows, crawled on hands and knees as long as their strength held out, lay gasping and trembling while they felt their life ebbing away, saw their own blood ooze over the earth, and felt death fan their foreheads, moist with the sweat of terror, with his cooling wings. They heard the rain of bullets whistle past them; they saw the shells in their headlong fury splinter even the rocks, and scatter them like dust before the wind. They groaned as they vainly sought to draw up their mutilated limbs in order to make their bodies into smaller compass. Their fear only increased. The energy of their brains seemed to be multiplied; their senses enabled them to feel their pain a hundredfold. Their dread became terrible; their hope of rescue died before death overtook them. Their prayers were mixed with curses; they were mad with terror. They suffered the agonies of the damned; hunger tore their intestines as if with sharp knives, and their throats seemed to run with molten lead. The sensitiveness of their nerves was heightened beyond belief, and at length their agony, their despair, and their terror of death forced the life out of their suffering bodies.

A battle had been fought, and a glorious victory had been won. The telegraph worked incessantly throughout the night, and next day, far away in another land, endless jubilation rent the air. The sobs of widows and the wail of fatherless children were drowned in the universal tumult. The joy was far too great and widespread to leave room for even the thought of pain. And a clergyman, whose calling required him to wipe away human tears and alleviate human suffering, went up into his pulpit, and uttered these blasphemous words—

“The Lord is on our side! Jesus Christ has blessed our arms!” he exclaimed to his congregation. “See that widow over there; how proudly she carries her head, although her husband has fallen on the battlefield! See

that old merchant over there ; his head is not bowed, although his only son has just been slain ! Look at that mother ; her sons are gone never to return, but her tears flow only with joy that they have done their duty ! Let us thank the Giver of all good things that He has bestowed upon our land such wives and fathers and mothers ! Their example shall teach our envious neighbours that we do not fear even another war, greater and bloodier even than this ! Praise be to God !—to Him who has given us strength, like the patriarch Abraham, to sacrifice our own sons upon the altar which we have erected to His glory !”

And the widow looked about her more proudly still, the old merchant straightened himself still more, and the mother stayed her sobbing.

But outside the church a man stood up on a stone at a corner, and began to speak while the congregation, strengthened by their pastor's words, streamed out into the street.

“ It is a lie, all this ! ” he shouted in a loud voice. “ It is all lies and blasphemy ! The widow's grief is real ; it is the merchant's pride and the poor mother's self-delusion that ”—

“ He is rather insulting,” muttered the people threateningly.

“ The Lord is *not* on our side,” he went on, “ for we walk not in His steps. Our sacrifices are *not* such as He demands, and the smoke of them does not ascend to heaven, but sinks to the earth. He asks that we shall sacrifice our pride, that we shall chastise our selfishness ; and we have turned a deaf ear to His voice ”—

“ He blasphemes, the hardened wretch ! ” murmured the crowd ; and they looked about for stones.

But the voice of the solitary man rose above the murmurs, and strong in his conviction he spoke on—

“ Does any of you know what the widow's husband thought on the day when he was tortured almost to madness—on the day when he prayed for death—death ? Does a sane, strong, healthy human being pray for death ? Need I tell you ? No ; think for yourselves ! What did

the old merchant's son feel when he was rotting away alive, forsaken and forgotten by all? What did the mother's sons think when the splinters of shell were cut out of their bleeding flesh, but without their lives being saved? None of you know—not one! And those who come home maimed and broken down—they tell only what they know others want them to tell, the stock words that are put into their mouths, and they deceive themselves and you for fear of others' censure. No; go out to the battlefields and the hospitals; listen to the moaning of the wounded, their agonising prayers and their fearful curses; listen to the words that pain and suffering bring to their burning tongues, to the senseless ravings that the fever of delirium wrings from their parched throats! Listen, and think! But I tell you the Almighty has not in His mercy received our sacrifices, for then He would not have allowed thousands to suffer and die as these have done. 'Peace on earth, good-will towards men,' and 'Thou shalt not kill,'—these are His commandments. Everything else is lies!"

"Traitor!" shouted an angry voice, and a stone flew past his ears. It did not hit him, but others followed, and the man tottered. The stones clattered against the church wall behind him; his head was wounded and the blood flowed. The crowd roared like an infuriated wild beast; strong fists were raised against him, and bearded lips yelled, "Traitor! traitor!" The man fell and was trampled in the mud. His blood flowed out into the gutter and mingled with the filth of the nearest sewer.

"Think!" was the word he uttered with his last breath, and the answer was, "Traitor! traitor!"

Again a man had fallen—nothing more!

But intoxicated with victory, the crowd set off through the streets to cheer outside the house of the statesman who was credited with the instigation of the war. On their way some stopped at a shop window where there was on view a common watch, to which was attached a ticket bearing the words: "This ticket was taken from the pocket of one of the enemy after the battle of —."

The crowd cheered and passed on. They then paid the originator of the war the homage that was his due, and good-humouredly allowed the police to disperse them.

And the next day the statesman stood up in Parliament and said—

“ The country has again spoken ; it is our bounden duty to bow before its will ! ”

A man fell, and yet another, another, and another, and another . . .

And why ?

It must be so.

Ask not, Why ? So much questioning is wearisome, and the answer will always be this.

CHAPTER V

THE BATTLE OF KOOPMAN'S KRAAL

THE fight between the two hostile forces seemed to drag. The line of marksmen out on the karoo had suffered a loss of three dead and five wounded, and inside the kraal one man, shot through the shoulder, had been brought to the missionary to receive his aid. Although some twenty exciting minutes had elapsed since the fight began, and although the shots fell thick and fast, raising everywhere small clouds of dust that disappeared almost as quickly as they came, nothing of any consequence had been effected. The Boers maintained an economical fire which, however, proved to be more effective than that of their advancing enemy. Van der Nath wished, if possible, to keep them at a distance until twilight should set in, when, he thought, it would be easy to retreat under cover of the darkness.

The English seemed to be losing patience. The firing-line made a desperate dash forward, and came a couple of hundred yards nearer. When the men again threw themselves on their faces they had left behind them a dozen fallen comrades, for the Boers increased their fire as soon as they exposed themselves fully to it. While one of the three companies boldly continued the attack, another made for the kopjes lying to the north. Beyond the reach of gunshot, they marched quickly over the karoo, while the defenders of the kraal vainly puzzled their brains to discover the object of the movement. The third company, which formed the reserve, remained immovable beside the sluit.

Van der Nath cautiously raised his head above the pro-

jecting stones, and gazed after the force as it withdrew, leaving behind it a small dust-cloud whirling in the sunlight. He very soon crept down again, without having learnt anything, for an English bullet had flattened itself against the stones in front of him, and some chips grazed his face—a proof that the enemy too had some good shots among them.

Half an hour had passed, during which both sides had been firing steadily, and still the distance between them was some eight hundred yards. Many of the English shots found their way between the stones of the kraal, so that the defenders had to be constantly on the lookout. By the sheep-pen there now lay three wounded and one dead. The old missionary uttered a prayer aloud, and the sound of his voice, rising from time to time above the noise of the firing, reached those who were fighting, and made them thoughtful. The dragoons sat huddled together in a small space, furious at being exposed to the fire of their own countrymen, who were unaware of their presence there. One of them was struck by a splinter of stone. Meanwhile the sick officer continued to be delirious, and raved of blood and death.

Suddenly the company that had marched to the north swung round, formed a firing-line at right angles to the other, and began to advance against the kraal. In less time than it takes to tell, the Boers had grasped the situation, and seen the danger that arose from the enemy's latest movement. They were now threatened from two sides, and if the outermost wing of the attackers were to be extended towards the east they must soon be surrounded. If the Englishmen could only maintain their positions, retreat was now impossible except in the direction they had come; and even that way was blocked, for some of the enemy's reserve were now moving to the south.

So far, Van der Nath was quite equal to the situation. He divided his men into three bodies, so that each might protect one side. The strongest of the three retained the former position, which furnished the best cover, while the two smaller bodies opened fire upon the advancing wings

of the English force. In spite of the stubborn resistance, the latter had gained a great advantage by their new tactics, and the Boers began to realise that their position must soon become untenable. Exposed to fire on three sides, the kraal's half-demolished walls could not be said to form the most desirable cover, and anxious looks were exchanged among the defenders. They had already begun to discharge their cartridges with a sort of nervous haste ; their eyes flashed, and they breathed excitedly ; but as the excitement of battle increased, their courage sank. There was now no question of taking careful aim ; the one thing to be done was to overwhelm the enemy with as thick a fire as possible, and so the Mausers crackled without intermission. The marksmanship for which they were famous was not of much account now, for only men who know that they are well protected can remain sufficiently cool-headed to make the most of their ability.

The English maintained a terrible fusilade. In the kraal there were now three more wounded, and they had to remain where they fell, for no one could venture forth to remove them. The spot behind the sheep-pen was proved to be anything but safe. The bullets found their way among the waggons, and tore the canvas coverings to pieces. A horse was wounded in the head, and careered madly over the karoo, several of its terrified companions following wildly in its wake.

Behind the stones things were becoming intolerable. One young fellow was shot through the shoulder by a glancing bullet, and as he tried to creep away another lodged in one of his elbows. An old man had his jaw shattered, and the blood streamed down over his long white beard. With dilated eyes he stood staring into space, as if wondering what had happened to him, while a subdued moan came from his throat. Next moment he sank down where he stood—dead : a bullet had gone right through his head, flattening itself against the stones behind him.

The position had grown desperate. In the space of twenty minutes everything had changed ; the bare idea of flight now seemed madness. With such a galling fire from

two sides, the Boers knew that they must fall to a man, unless, indeed, they decided to surrender unconditionally. To this thought no one had as yet given expression, but every man hoped that his neighbour would have the courage to do so. The ruins of the kraal really protected only on one side ; those who had sought shelter behind the north wall were exposed to the bullets from the south, and those who lay on the other side were in a like position. They had no longer the feeling of safety that arose from the fact that their backs were protected ; moreover, they were forced to use all their vigilance to protect themselves in front. In itself this was sufficiently trying, for as soon as a hat showed itself above the stones there came a perfect shower of bullets, so that the owner might count himself lucky if he did not get killed on the spot.

The English came slowly but surely nearer. The gaps between the detachments were filled from the reserve ; the wing spread itself out to the west, and it was easy to see how things would end, for all the time the deadliness of their fire increased.

The excitement of the Boers rose ; groans and shouts of agony sounded on every side ; deeds which, in other circumstances, would have been proofs of courage and contempt of death, were performed in a kind of wild stupor. A middle-aged Boer began singing a psalm aloud, and two others tried to join in. A young boy near by began to cry, and a man, in a fit of frenzy, stood up, and was immediately hurled to the earth with a couple of bullets through his stomach. The coolness which is generally the Boer's chief characteristic had now vanished ; the terror of death had laid hold of the men, clutching them in its iron grasp. Those who were facing fire for the first time crept, trembling and hopeless, down among the stones and hollows, leaving their comrades to continue the useless struggle. Old tales about triumphant battles, fought out between man and man, passed dimly through their terror-stricken minds, but this assuredly was something different from what they had pictured. They could now form some idea of what a modern war really is, and the tremendous demands imposed

upon a man by the valour which everyone was wont to belaud. To lie in a well-chosen and well-protected position, and shower forth a mass of bullets upon a storming enemy, was child's play to this. They lay stretched out on the ground, while above and around them a swarm of death-messengers hummed incessantly about them in every direction. The slightest movement was perilous ; and the enemy was steadily creeping nearer and nearer, gradually forming a circle around them. Soon—in a few moments, perhaps—his bullets would be raining into the kraal from every side.

The officer commanding the English force had learnt not a little from the losses sustained by his side in earlier engagements. The time was past when, with careless assurance, and at a terrible cost in life, they made frontal attacks upon almost impregnable positions. They advanced with their faces to the earth, pouring their fire upon the enemy as they progressed. They executed turning movements, endeavoured to discover the weak points of their opponents, and at length succeeded in establishing an incontestable superiority.

Although in this fight, as in many others, not one bullet in a hundred hit its mark, yet every shot, as it whizzed through the crevices of the kraal, or flattened itself against its walls, served to break the last remnant of the Boers' courage and sap their power of resistance. When one half of a company advanced its position, the other half redoubled its fire ; then the first portion, after getting about twenty yards nearer the kraal, reopened fire energetically until their comrades had come up beside them.

The English officers, feeling certain that the Boers must soon succumb, saw no need for haste. Their plans for the final attack were already settled ; all they were waiting for now was the right moment, when all would soon be over. But it would have been unwise to begin until about half of the Mausers had been silenced, and that was not yet. The attack was to be directed against the deserted house some thirty yards from the kraal. A dozen marksmen in its top storey would surely suffice to command the Boer position.

The major who had remained by the slut, and had been following every turn of the fight through his field-glass, now looked coolly at his watch, and turned to an officer beside him.

“Lieutenant Sewell,” said he, “tell Captain Stone that he must storm the place in a quarter of an hour. Tell him the whole of the reserve will advance and take part in the attack.”

The adjutant stole a glance at “the whole of the reserve,” which included those in charge of the horses, and numbered at most fifty men.

“Yes, sir!” he answered, and set off to execute the order.

When he had gone the major indulged for a few moments in pleasant reflections. He was satisfied that chance had given him an easy task. To his credit there would be successful reconnoitring, a victory, with four score of prisoners, after a stiff fight, the report of which would get his name into all the newspapers. Certainly, luck was on his side. And he complacently pictured himself in a colonel’s uniform.

But behind a heap of stones lay another commanding officer, whose thoughts were far from cheerful. Van der Nath’s face was very pale. He had a clear impression of all that was passing in the minds of his men; he saw their despondency and apathy, and felt that the end was near. He himself was entirely unconscious of fear, but he was forced to ask himself whether it was right to play havoc any longer with the lives of his friends, now that there could be but one issue. Looking the inexorable truth in the face, he saw that his expedition had failed, and that all hope of joining his comrades was gone. If death did not claim him within the next few minutes, all he could see in the future was the pontoons of Cape Town and later on St. Helena. He thought for a moment of his son, little Isaac, who was looking after the farm in his absence, and he smiled sadly. Probably they would never meet again in this world, and at the thought he raised his eyes to heaven.

“The Lord gave, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the

name of the Lord," he murmured. The honest, fervid religious feeling, which characterised him in common with most of his countrymen, helped him to find the only solace that avails in great adversity. He called to mind the much-improved Job, whose words he had so often read in his old Bible, and he felt his lost strength and courage come back to him in this, the greatest trial of his life.

Abraham Van der Nath was a man of action. With him, to think was to act. He stretched himself out on the ground and hastily searched in his pocket for a handkerchief, which he meant to hoist in the air at the end of his rifle. He alone was responsible for all these lives, and he felt he must do the only thing that was left for him to do.

Regardless of the danger he ran, the old missionary stood up and looked at him. He had guessed what was about to happen by the feverish restlessness of the leader's movements and the convulsions of his pale face. So, when he saw the white handkerchief in his hand, he went quietly up to him in order to strengthen him in his purpose. The bullets whizzed about his hoary head, and his hat, riddled with shot, was carried far away. The old man did not turn his head, but went quietly on, untouched. He sank on his knees by the field-cornet, and laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

"It is the only alternative," said Van der Nath apologetically. "The only alternative," he repeated, looking questioningly at two of his men who had crept nearer, and were silently watching what he meant to do.

They understood, and dejectedly nodded their approval. What he had said was true: there was nothing for it but to surrender.

The missionary hurriedly helped him to tie the handkerchief securely to the rifle.

A struggle was going on silently in the field-cornet's breast, and he looked searchingly round, as if trying for the last time to find some other way out of the difficulty. It was in vain; he could discover nothing. The blue vault of heaven stretched high above them; the afternoon sun

shone brightly on the red sand and the stunted scrub of the karoo ; the enemy's line crept inexorably nearer, their fire increasing perceptibly, possibly as a prelude to the coming attack. That, at all events, must be prevented. So, with a groan, Van der Nath seized his rifle to hoist the flag of truce. But first he asked in a dismal tone—

“How many?”

“Six dead and nineteen wounded,” came the reply, gloomily from his nearest neighbour on the left.

A deep sigh escaped from Van der Nath's lips. This, then, was the end of the expedition that had been so fortunately begun. Yet he knew that deliverance lay just beyond the two kopjes whose summits he could discern away to the north as he lay. He raised his rifle, and a faint breeze had begun to unfurl the tiny flag, but next moment the weapon was knocked from his grasp and fell to the ground. Van der Nath turned quietly round,—nothing could astonish him greatly now,—and looked at the man who had dared to interfere with him. Close beside him he saw the hot, excited face of Zimmer.

“Where do you come from?”

Zimmer did not answer his question, but pantingly whispered into the field-cornet's ear—

“De Vlies has begun his march south!”

“What do you say!” exclaimed Van der Nath, his eyes aflame. “Where is he?”

“Twenty miles north of the kopjes.”

“Too far off! He won't get here in time!” The light vanished from his eyes, and he began to pick up his rifle, but for the second time Zimmer prevented him.

“Let me finish! Du Wallon is there with the vanguard!”

“By the kopjes? Oh!” And with an eagerness as comprehensible as his former reluctance, he tore the flag from his rifle, took aim over the plain and fired.

“Quick fire!” he shouted loudly; “quick fire! The commandant is here!”

His words went like an electric shock through the dejected troop. Their rifles were eagerly raised, and the

rapidity of the reports soon proclaimed that a new spirit prevailed behind the stone heaps in the kraal.

“The commandant! the commandant!” repeated the Boers, and they nodded cheerfully to each other. What did it matter if a few more of them fell? Relief was on its way, near at hand, and those left alive, at all events, would escape that which, next to death, was the worst fate they could imagine—to be led away as prisoners by the hated invaders.

The English, influenced by the slackening fire of the defenders, had been seriously considering their final attack when the fusilade broke out with fresh vigour. This they interpreted as the last effort of despair, and waited in position. They would not buy their victory more dearly than was necessary.

They paused, as if to gain strength for their onslaught. They could not but ask themselves the reason of the more vigorous fire. The major, like every English officer, knew the necessity of taking into account the numerous artifices in which his enemy was so proficient. He concluded that the temporary slackening of the fire was merely a device to induce him to expose his men and storm the position prematurely. There was still half an hour before sunset, and he determined to show them that he could wait. So, satisfied that he had not allowed himself to be befooled, he sent off a fresh order countermanding the previous one.

Meanwhile Zimmer lay on the ground beside the field-cornet, panting and blowing. He had done a day's work considerably beyond ordinary human powers. After a ride that had cost the life of his good horse, he, with his two companions, had reached the *sluit*, nearly riding into the battalion that lay concealed in it. To turn their horses and gallop for the *kopjes* to the north was the work of a moment. When they had recovered from their astonishment at having escaped with whole skins, they began to ask each other why they had not been fired at. The next question was how things would go with their friends who were following them up. It was clear that something must

be done, for it was not difficult to see that they had been allowed to pass unmolested in the hope of a better capture. On they rode as if for dear life, and reached the two kopjes an hour before Van der Nath arrived at the spot where he found his retreat cut off.

At the foot of the nearest hill Zimmer's horse fell dead. Its rider was on his feet in a moment, and the three men stood round the dead beast much perplexed, for it was no joke to find oneself out on the karoo on foot. At length old Jan decided what had better be done. He resolved to climb the kopje in order to get a survey of the district. Meanwhile Zimmer could use his horse, and the other two could continue their way through the pass. Very reluctantly the younger men yielded, but they had no reason to regret their decision. They began to skirt the hill while Jan exerted his stiff legs in climbing its steep slope. When he had got about half-way up he shouted to them, and Pieter Huys dismounted and went after him to hear what he had to say. It must be something unusual to make old Jan swing his arms about like the sails of a windmill. It took Pieter, with his mountaineer's legs, only a few minutes to catch up the old man, whom he found pointing excitedly to the north.

"Do you see there, Pieter?" he said. "That is certainly no roonek who comes riding like that across the plain."

Pieter shaded his eyes with his hand, and saw a large column coming from the north right towards the place where they stood. He remained silent for a moment; then he shouted out in great glee—

"They are our people! The commandant is coming south!"

Old Jan had taken his spectacles from his pocket and placed them carefully and deliberately on his nose. He then surveyed the whole district from north to south. Beneath, on both sides, stretched the immense plain, the red, even surface of which was dotted here and there with irregular strips of karoo bushes.

"Humph!" he said, thoughtfully shaking his head;

"they are our people, but they are many miles away yet." He turned to the south, adding: "And there rides Van der Nath for his life. Why should he be in such a hurry? I don't like to see them rushing on like madmen; at such a pace it is not easy to see or hear anything. Well, well; we had better warn them, for at that rate they will be in among the rooneks in half an hour."

Jan cocked his rifle, aimed across the plain, and fired.

"I hope they'll hear that and understand. . . . Yes, they have stopped, and . . . Aha! they are swinging round to the right. Well, he is a clever fellow who rides at their head. He understands his business."

And, well satisfied, Jan reloaded, while with the long-drawn loquacity of age he continued—

"Now the rooneks are sorry they let us get by, but it is a bit too late. H'm! Our folk are not coming this way, but the kraal is certainly not bad cover. Pieter, my lad, if we had time we might see a fine sight; but now you must ride off to the commandant and beg him to hurry a bit. These fellows number pretty well four hundred men. Four hundred of them is not too many for eighty of us, for a Boer is as good as ten rooneks—that I know for certain, for I have fought with them before. But we need not shed our blood unnecessarily in a little fight; it is much better that we should take them prisoners. So ride as fast as your horse can gallop, and ask the commandant to hurry up, for every minute's delay may mean a man's life. So it is better that you should sweat a bit. Look sharp, my lad; but first tell Zimmer that he must let the field-cornet know. Abraham Van der Nath is my friend, and I should be sorry if any harm came to him in the fight. And one always shoots better when one knows that help is near—I know all about that, for I have been once or twice in that situation myself. Look sharp, I say, and don't spare either yourself or your horse. You can find another horse, but a dead man is always a dead man."

And old Jan van Gracht nodded approvingly as Pieter Huys rushed down the rocky slope, shouted some words to Zimmer as he passed him, and then galloped away. The

old man took his rifle under his arm and slowly made his way down to the foot of the kopje. Here he settled himself as comfortably as possible and awaited events, ready to take part in the fight if the enemy should come within gunshot. It never occurred to him that he was running a great risk in thus isolating himself from his comrades, for in spite of his seventy years he looked upon himself as quite equal to ten regulars, and he would not have minded exchanging shots with double that number. He was obstinate, and, like his comrades of the old Majuba days, he spoke with contemptuous superiority of everything that was English.

Of the three scouts, Zimmer had the most difficult task. So long as he was in the pass he thought little of it, but as soon as he had got past the kopje he saw that he would have to strain every sinew and muscle to the uttermost. He was now about as far from the English firing-line as from the kraal. To ride straight ahead would have meant certain death, for he would be exposed to the enemy's fire at short range. While he was considering what he had better do—whether he should make a long detour on horseback to the farther side of the kraal, or try to reach it on foot—he saw a portion of the English force beginning to advance in his direction. He thought he had been discovered, and wheeled round his horse, but he soon saw that no notice was taken of his presence. He decided to ride farther to the east, keeping out of range, and trying to enter the kraal from the open side. So, putting his horse to the gallop, he made his way over the plain. After about twenty minutes' riding he turned to the south and rode for a time in that direction. It was not long before he was seen, and a couple of bullets came whistling near his head, conveying an unpleasant warning of the fact.

Zimmer slipped down from his horse, and left it to its fate, and went on towards the kraal. He took the distance to be about an English mile, and began covering it at an even jog-trot. But the enemy still had their eyes on him, and more bullets whizzed past. The easiest way out of the difficulty was to let them think they had shot him, so

he flung himself on the ground. For a time he lay still ; then he looked carefully round. He felt tolerably sure that no one was thinking any more about him, so, crawling on his hands and knees, he went on until he got within a few hundred yards of his goal. But now the danger increased. Every shot that passed over the walls of the kraal flew out over the plain in all directions, and neither forethought nor calculation was of the slightest use in trying to avoid them. Round about whirled the little red dust-clouds raised by the bullets ; in front, beside and behind him fell a slow shower of twigs and leaves. Zimmer understood the danger he ran, but that did not alter his determination to go forward ; and forward he went.

Presently it struck him that his own people were beginning to fire at hopelessly long intervals. This made him uneasy, and he increased his pace, trying as he went to make use of the mounds that seemed likely to afford him the most protection. Still he crept on, expecting every moment to be his last.

The strain was incredible, but to go back was now just as dangerous as to go on. After resting in a hollow for a few moments, he pushed on for about thirty yards. He then noticed that the ground rose, and that in front of him there was a broad ridge. At the sight of this fresh obstacle he regained all his coolness. He could see at a glance that to crawl round the long mound would take too long, so he resolved to get over it. Just as he was creeping over the summit a bullet grazed the crown of his head. He shut his eyes and fell in a heap among some bushes in a little hollow at the foot. His hat and rifle were gone, and when at length he ventured to feel the spot where the bullet had hit him, he found that it had left a painful wale across his scalp. He heaved a deep sigh of relief, and crawled on. To his astonishment he found that he had reached his goal. He slipped in through an opening in the wall of the kraal, and, wet with sweat, covered with red dust, and his clothes in tatters, he sank down beside the field-cornet. As has been seen, he came not a moment too soon. As for him, he thought himself lucky to have been able to risk

his life, the import of his message being for him more than sufficient compensation.

The short twilight was about to fall. The Boer shots peppered out from every crevice in the stone heaps, but the English were not behindhand with their reply. They meant to see the end of the business, and had little idea of letting a mere handful of desperate men keep them back much longer. The commanding officer shut up his field-glasses, put them in their case, and with his sword signalled to the reserve force. Forty men jumped up out of the slit, formed into line, and came marching over the plain. The stubborn resistance irritated them ; they felt that they had waited long enough, and did not mean to spare themselves. The major looked at his last troop and smiled contentedly, for the men's bearing was excellent. Before joining them to lead the attack, he looked round. He did so quite mechanically, without any particular purpose, but afterwards he considered himself lucky for having done so. The two kopjes seemed suddenly to have become alive, and—and—he tore his glasses out of their case and looked to the north-west. Was he mistaken, or was it really . . .?

Over the plain behind him came trotting a long line of horsemen. The line stretched almost right across the ground, and the retreat of the English force was already shut off, while from the north and west appeared fresh detachments. The pass had been transformed into a gigantic mouth, which vomited forth enemies over the plain. The major dropped his field-glass and pressed his hand to his forehead, which had become suffused with perspiration at the shock. Like a flash he took in the situation, and saw that all was lost. While his men surrounded the kraal and its defenders, they themselves were surrounded by a superior force. It was one of these unforeseen incidents in which a war is so rich. The major had reckoned up every possibility ; he had led his men in a manner beyond all praise, and had the fruits of his skill actually in his hand, when, just as he was about to close it upon his spoil, chance had drawn its big black stroke over everything, changing his triumph into a crushing defeat.

Suddenly a cannon thundered from the pass, and a shell burst upon the plain. It did no damage, but it caused all eyes to be instantly turned towards the north. The levelled rifles sank, and there came a silence which was even more paralysing than the sudden crash of the cannon.

Again the rifle fire was resumed, and again death reaped where man sowed. A second cannon shot had even a greater effect; it burst in the centre of the English line, causing the startled soldiers to spring aside. The appearance of the big guns was a surprise to all, and when the English at length realised the situation their fire gradually ceased. They had been so completely occupied with the work they had in hand that they had noticed nothing until it was too late to change their tactics.

When the third shell came whizzing down close to the spot where its predecessor had fallen, the major turned to the only officer he had kept beside him.

“Look here,” he said, holding out his handkerchief, “fasten that to your sword and ride over yonder !”

“Major Foley !”

“Yes, yes, I know; but it's of no use. Before the troops can reach here and get their horses, they will be upon us. We might have time to rally here, but what would that mean, do you think? Those fellows would sweep us down with a few volleys, and if any escaped they would only be annihilated with their shell.”

The officer bowed before the inevitable, took the handkerchief, mounted the horse which a soldier had led forward, and galloped off towards the north. He fastened the handkerchief to his sword as he rode, and waved it aloft, shouting to the men nearest him to stop firing.

In a few minutes the firing had almost ceased. Most of the English force had seen the flag of truce, and understood its meaning. Only from the detachment to the south of the kraal came some shots, for there no one had grasped what had occurred. The commanding officer despatched an orderly to them, for he did not wish to exasperate the enemy and lay his men open to reprisals; but before his

message had reached its goal the detachment again opened a sharp fusilade.

The officer who had been ordered to lead the attack had seen the reserve summoned to advance, and imagined he foresaw everything. The noise of the cannon suddenly upset his ideas, and as the intervening hills concealed the entire plain, with the exception of the space between his own position and the kraal, he was utterly unable to conceive what had happened. As the moment for the attack had come, the unfortunate captain decided to obey his orders. Just at this moment he noticed the orderly coming riding across the plain, waving his arms and shouting something that the distance rendered inaudible.

“A fresh order to attack,” thought the captain, who had no longer any doubt as to what he should do. With an inspiriting shout he ordered his men to their feet and to charge with the bayonet.

With a deafening cheer hundreds of brave fellows rushed forward, determined to gain a victory or die.

The entire Boer force gathered at the southern wall of the kraal to see what the enemy meant to do. They had seen the flag of truce, and as the English fire had ceased to the north and west they also had ceased. But now, when they thought that the fight was at an end, they had to withstand an attack from the south. This also was one of those incalculable incidents so common in modern warfare. Everything had been changed; and yet here was a detachment advancing to the attack! It was impossible to mistake their intention. The Boers began to shout and make signs to acquaint the enemy with the new phase that the fight had assumed. All was in vain. The excitement of the onslaught made them deaf and blind; those who did hear only thought that the shouting was derisive, and that served to increase their anger. On they rushed still, their eyes aglow and their hearts aflame with rage.

“It’s as if a mad dog had bitten them,” said a man standing beside Van der Nath, who asked himself in bewilderment what it all could mean.

"This shows how the rooneks fight!" shouted another Boer angrily.

"The flag of truce is only one of their stock tricks!" exclaimed a third.

"Shoot, lads!" yelled a fourth, seeing that the field-cornet kept silent.

A well-directed volley crashed from the wall, laying low some thirty of the storming party, who were still about fifty yards away. The Mausers continued their deadly work, and, blinded, dizzy, and enraged, the soldiers rushed upon the building, which was the goal of their onslaught. A few of them stormed up the steps and reached the upper floor, from which vantage-point they hoped to carry on the fight. The extraordinary stillness about them caused them to pause. The fire from the kraal also had ceased as soon as they had found cover. An officer stuck his head through a hole in the roof. In a moment he understood the change that had taken place in the situation. Deadly pale, he withdrew and went down to his superior officer.

"It's all over, captain," he said quietly.

"What! Are you mad, Wilkes?" exclaimed the captain, who had just seized a wounded soldier's rifle, and was about to take an active part in the fight.

"They have surrendered!"

"The Boers?"

"No, our men."

"I'll be d—d if I understand a word you say!"

Lieutenant Wilkes took the captain's arm and led him up the stairs to the aperture. He pointed over the plain.

The rifle fell with a thud from the captain's hand. He had seen the long lines of Boer horsemen galloping over the veldt; he had seen the flag of truce, and the rest of the English force standing gloomily in two masses. He took some time to collect himself. At length he stammered in a low tone—

"Now I understand . . . the guns, and . . . the silence. Let the men know, Wilkes."

Much against his will, the lieutenant descended to fulfil the unpleasant commission. The soldiers were eagerly pre-

paring to renew the fight, and it was with reluctance that they obeyed. They were not told what had happened, but instinctively they suspected that it must be something the reverse of advantageous. Grumblingly they laid their rifles at their feet and waited. The lieutenant went out to continue his unpleasant round. In the yard he found his own troop awaiting orders. He gave them and passed on.

Beside the stables lay a soldier on his knees, staring over at the kraal, of which he commanded a full view from his place. Down his face trickled several tiny streams of blood from a wound over his temple. His eyes were kindled with a burning hate; for he had in his mind the last words which his dearest comrade had called out to him as he fell dead beside him. His attention was riveted on a man—naturally an enemy, or why should he be there?—who was standing up on a Boer wagon, gesticulating in an extraordinary fashion, and shouting a strange string of incoherences. There was a horrible gleam in the soldier's eye; he cocked his rifle, aimed carefully, and fired.

"There, Billy!" he exclaimed maliciously; "at any rate I have avenged you now!"

With a couple of strides Lieutenant Wilkes was at his side, and dragged him backwards.

The shot was the last shot fired at the battle of Koopman's Kraal, and it killed Lieutenant E. W. Stephens of Her Britannic Majesty's army.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE AFRICAN SKY

“**I**T was a clever trap,” said Major Foley, when he had given up his sword to Commandant du Wallon. Then, as if to mitigate in some degree his own responsibility in the matter, he added, “Yes, anyone might have fallen into a trap like that.”

“It was no trap ; it was merely luck.”

The answer evidently astonished the major, and in his embarrassment he twisted his long moustache, and said—

“No ; but, sir, I suppose you will admit”—

“Excuse my interrupting you, sir,” said the commandant, “but I was not even aware there were any English in the neighbourhood, and I was too far away to hear the noise of the firing. But I was told of your whereabouts. I made haste ; we have good horses, as you are, perhaps, aware ; and the rest you know about as well as I do myself.”

“I understand,” remarked the major dejectedly ; “the field-cornet, of course, knew of your advance.”

“No ; he thought I was a hundred miles away.”

“Then I can’t understand at all how”—

“It happened just as I have told you, sir. Luck, and nothing else, brought me here at the right moment.”

Major Foley shook his head, and looked dubiously at his officers, who stood behind him. They smiled complaisantly, but mistrust was plainly to be read in their faces. They thought it only natural that the enemy should not be anxious to let their prisoners have information of their movements.

"What you say is all very well," admitted the major, who could not help returning to the point where he had started, "but we did not expect to meet any but small scouting parties so far south."

"Gentlemen," answered du Wallon politely, "it is our rule always to do that which is least expected of us. It helps to lend variety to war."

"H'mph!" grunted the major, feeling he had made himself ridiculous. "We had special information from headquarters that there were no big columns south of Bethlehem."

"If you will look about you, gentlemen, you may easily assure yourselves of the contrary. To-morrow, when de Vlies will be here with his whole force, you will see it even more plainly."

"My dear sir, it is impossible!"

"To-morrow, I say; we have instructions to wait for him here."

The officers grew grave immediately. It would be foolish to doubt any longer such a positive statement. Evidently they had been the victims of another of those tricks which the mobile enemy was constantly playing their generals. What the major had just said was literally true; no one had expected to encounter a large force. According to the last reports, de Vlies was being chased by two superior forces a few hundred miles to the north, but instead of that he was only a day's march from them. This, indeed, was a strange war, in which no one ever seemed to know what was really taking place. And still stranger was the enemy, who, after being scattered, always collected again with fresh strength, and an unconquerable readiness for fight. Were it not that their pluck was so exasperating, one could not but admire them.

"I have been making a little excursion out west," continued du Wallon. "You Englishmen are exceedingly useful. You build railways and lay telegraph and telephone lines almost everywhere; all the same we cannot show our gratitude, for if we want railways we can make them for ourselves. So I have been amusing myself

tearing up the connecting lines behind one of your gangs, and now they will have something to occupy them. Meanwhile de Vlies will be able to do what he has to do down here."

The prisoners exchanged gloomy looks, but otherwise managed to restrain their vexation. With the same courteous irony the commandant went on—

"By the time the English force in the north gets down here we shall probably be up there again. That is our game. But, like myself, you gentlemen must be hungry. May I invite you to have some supper, such as circumstances will allow? We shall not want for much, I can assure you; among other things we have captured a convoy, and at the moment we have some excellent beer, splendid wines, good whisky, and a couple of waggons full of tinned provisions."

In spite of their irony, these words were accompanied by such a pleasant smile that the officers could not but accept the invitation. Indeed, their appetites left them no other choice, and so they followed the commandant as he led the way.

Du Wallon despatched a Kaffir to fetch Van der Nath, the missionary, and two other field-cornets, who were also to be his guests. As they passed through the laager, which had been pitched in less than half an hour at the foot of the two kopjes, he entertained the officers with small-talk, which, though it contained very little, was nevertheless pleasant to listen to. Major Foley, as he walked beside him, put forth all his powers of conversation also, and so pleased was he with himself that he almost forgot the annoying circumstances of his position. Behind came the other officers, who had now been joined by Lieutenant Kennedy. The tall, dirty, brigand-like Boers, with their bushy beards and their unsoldierly bearing, made way good-humouredly for the little group, and when they had passed stood looking after them.

The waggons had been placed in a curved line, and among them could be seen what had once been an English convoy. The officers pretended not to see it; instead,

they examined the guns that were pointed out over the plain. The gunners were, if possible, even more slovenly in appearance than their comrades, and at the sight of them the spirits of the prisoners rose. If the one regular force of the enemy looked like this, it was easy to imagine what the rest must be worth. A number of Kaffir drivers were jumping noisily in and out among the waggons, feeding the horses, polishing and cleaning, busying themselves with the hundred odd things that have to be done during a halt. The Boers lay stretched out around large fires, or else paced slowly up and down with their lighted pipes in their mouths. Now that darkness had set in they presented a decidedly wretched appearance, with their great ragged coats dangling about their legs. As they walked to and fro, planting their heavy boots firmly on the hard ground, all that could be seen of their features was their gleaming eyes, which broke the shadow cast by their broad-brimmed hats. In one corner could be heard some voices gravely singing a psalm, and when it was finished a dusty field-cornet stepped forward, uncovered his head devoutly, and began to preach.

The officers, as they saw all this, bit their lips. It annoyed them to think that they had been outwitted by this crowd of sluggish peasants, whose powers of cohesion were so feeble that the first reverse would be sure to scatter half of them to every point of the compass. They consoled themselves, however, with the reflection that on this occasion the enemy's numerical superiority had been excessive, and that—as the Boer commandant had so politely put it—the luck had really been on the other side. They exchanged questions with each other in whispers as they groped their way through the darkness, sometimes stepping over a sleeping Boer lying with his rifle in his hand across their path. Who was this du Wallon? Had anyone ever heard of him before? They had noted his almost elegant clothes, his carefully polished boots, his air of perfect self-possession, and his cultivated manner of speech. They thought he must be a foreign officer, but of what nationality they could not guess, for most of the foreigners had hurried

away when the early reverses of the English had been followed by victories.

Happily they were not to wait long to have their curiosity satisfied on most of these points. As soon as they had reached the spot in the middle of the laager where the commandant's Kaffir servants had spread a cloth upon the ground, and piled it with a profusion of maize cakes, butter, and English tinned goods, du Wallon himself spoke.

"Before we sit down to table," he said, "perhaps it will be well if I introduced myself. For my part I know hardly anything that is so bad for the appetite as—the fear that one is not in good company. And so"—here he bowed ceremoniously—"Mr. du Wallon, Doctor of Philosophy—I have my diploma in my pocket—wishes you welcome, gentlemen! To dispel all suspicion, I may tell you that I was born within fifty miles of this spot. My forefathers belonged to the early Huguenots who emigrated to this country; and my people are well known to-day among the lesser families of the Free State. I have studied at several European universities, but when the war broke out I threw my books away, set out for home, and took to the field. Through the influence of my family I was chosen field-cornet, and when our commandant fell (those of us who are not taken prisoner generally do fall), I became his successor. Unfortunately my commando dwindled considerably, the natural result of English bullets and private interests. Now, gentlemen, you know something about me. For my part, I know that when one meets English officers one always meets gentlemen."

The commandant closed his little speech with another courteous bow, adding—

"Supper is ready; let us sit down, gentlemen."

The curiosity of the captured officers was by no means satisfied, but they could not but feel flattered by his courtesy. As neither table nor chairs were available, they all settled themselves on the ground as best they might. At a sign from du Wallon, Van der Nath seated himself on the commandant's left-hand side, while Major Foley occupied his right. The missionary sat beside an English

army doctor, whose temper seemed a little surly ; the other officers formed a group by themselves, and at a little distance there sat three field-cornets, silent and serious.

The appetites of all seemed in keeping with the abundance of the fare, and without more ado they set to work with hands and teeth. Du Wallon played the part of host like a man of the world, and all chatted merrily as they did justice to the meal.

“Major Foley,” called out the indefatigable commandant, “please help yourself to pickles ! If they are not good, the fault is not mine, but rather that of your countrymen. Pastor, be good enough to pass the mustard for your neighbour the doctor ! Cornet Westhuizen, the lieutenant there is looking for something to drink ; may I ask you to hand over a couple of bottles.”

To the prisoners this supper in the midst of the veldt was like a story out of the *Arabian Nights*. The pleasantries of their host, which, though somewhat ironical, were for the most part harmless, was all the more agreeable because of the reserve of his subordinates. There was no longer any talk of fighting or defeat, and presently, when their hunger had been appeased, a feeling of quiet contentment began to creep over all.

The contrasts furnished by the guests served to increase the strangeness of the situation. Du Wallon, who was a European to the finger-tips, had, of course, very little in common with his fellow-countrymen. But two greater contrasts than Major Foley and Field-Cornet Van der Nath it would have been difficult to find. Both were tall, fine men, but with that the resemblance ended. In the flickering light of the fire behind them, they presented two entirely different types.

The major, with his big head, his fresh complexion, his enormous moustache, and his strong, shrill voice, was one of those who want for nothing in the world, a man who, while putting up with the hardships of the campaign and performing his duty most excellently, nevertheless preferred a life of leisure and amusement. He took part in the conversation with relish, as if anxious to show that an

English officer's powers were in no way inferior to those of a doctor of philosophy from a couple of European universities.

Three paces away, reserved and silent, sat Van der Nath, a representative of two small nations that had risen again and again after a succession of bloody defeats—after everything, indeed, had seemed at an end. He had laid aside his hat, and sat with his unkempt hair hanging down over his shoulders, a dirty rag bound across his forehead to stop the bleeding of a wound. He turned his small, kindly eyes curiously from one to the other, and stroked his long beard, making praiseworthy endeavours to interest himself in all that was going on about him and to join in the merriment. But his embarrassment increased when he looked at the elegant appearance of the strangers and then at his own clumsy boots, one of which had split, so that his toes could be seen protruding through a grey sock. He sat there feeling as much out of place as some bashful peasant lad who accidentally finds himself in fine company. In spite of the roughness of the campaign, these gentlemen were nevertheless perfectly well dressed, and the untidiness of his own state made him uncomfortable. Yet he could not but admire them, much as a child admires better conditioned people whom he can never hope to copy.

It was not envy that his thoughts excited, but only a sort of subdued sadness at the difference between the two peoples who had never met except as enemies. For his heart was wholly with his own honest peasants; he loved them too well not to feel with them in all their joys and sorrows. Yes, he himself was only a peasant, whom chance had thrown among gentlemen. It never crossed his mind that he belonged to the victors. And he admired the loud-voiced jolly major, who sat by the commandant and behaved as his equal. Well, well; he was one of a nation that was great enough to disregard reverses. He belonged to those who would be the victors in the end, and could therefore wait. Van der Nath felt a cold shiver run down his back at the thought. His poor little abandoned nation was doomed to go under. Man after man they would all

fall, victims left prostrate by the stronger on his way to an unknown goal. At the thought he raised his head boldly, and said to himself, "There is an almighty God above ; He decides and settles everything for the best !"

He stretched out his hand to take a maize cake from the cloth, but a young lieutenant, seeing his intention, handed it to him with a pleasant smile. Van der Nath blushed like a shy schoolgirl, and thanked him almost humbly for his attention. As he drew back his own big, coarse workman's hand, how ugly it looked compared with the other's aristocratic, white, womanly hand ! For the first time in his life Van der Nath felt ashamed of his horny fingers, with their broad, flat, blackened tips. It was all very strange ; it was strange and discouraging to know that Providence seemed to have given the enemy everything, while the little nation, to whom the struggle meant life or death, possessed nothing in the world but their steadfast belief in a just God. What did it matter to him if it were true, as he had heard, that their leaders had been bribed or corrupted with English gold ? Everyone must answer for himself, as he tried to do. He gazed out into the boundless space, and as he did so a beautiful smile lighted up his face. He would first see his son, little Isaac, listen to his childish voice, and stroke his hair. Then—he shrugged his shoulders, but the smile remained on his lips—then the end might be what it would.

Du Wallon evidently enjoyed playing the host to guests who were entirely in his power. He laughed loudly at the major's stories of half-mad wagers and impossible whist-hands. Yet, with all his jocularity, he showed that he had not forgotten the graver aspects of the situation, for, with an "Excuse me a moment, gentlemen !" he turned to one of the field-cornets and said quietly—

"Listen, Westhuizen ; just go to the prisoners and tell them they must not be up to any tricks. The moon will soon be up, but the laager is surrounded by a double cordon of guards. It wouldn't be pleasant to have to shoot any of them."

The conversation ceased instantly. The officers drew

themselves up, and exchanged significant glances. They understood that the warning referred to them just as much as to the men. But du Wallon laughed, noticing nothing ; he had already begun an anecdote of student life in Geneva. The meal was approaching its close, and a certain drowsiness was creeping over the company. The missionary sat with his head resting on his hands, apparently pondering over some difficult problem. Beside him the English army surgeon lay stretched upon the ground yawning. He was thinking of the wounded and the heavy work in store for him next day. The officers took out their cigars and began to smoke.

The moon rose slowly above the horizon, shedding its pale light over the great plain, the stillness of which was broken only by the movement of the watchful patrols, whose long shadows stretched along the ground. Behind rose the two kopjes, dark and forbidding, surrounded by great heaps of stones one rising above the other. From the waggon-lines came still the monotonous chatter of the Kaffirs, and from time to time the silence that otherwise reigned over the sleeping laager was broken by the isolated sound of human voices from the outskirts.

The fire burnt low, casting its flickering light upon the powerful figures of the men who lay around. It was one of those magnificent nights that only South Africa can show, and, as if to make it still more perfect, a gentle caressing wind breathed over the karoo, freshening the atmosphere of the camp.

Fascinated by the fairy-like beauty of the scene, the men lay on the ground round the tablecloth, looking out into the night, feeling for the moment no desire to exchange thoughts. Presently the commandant, in a tone whose tender accents thrilled those who heard him, uttered the words—

“ My fatherland ! ”

He seemed about to say something else, but contented himself with repeating the words a second time. He then stretched out his arms as if he would embrace the whole landscape, and said—

"Fatherland!—does not that express everything that man can say?"

Old Jan van Gracht came along with his rifle in one hand and his saddle-pouch in the other. He slowly approached the fire where his comrades lay, and settled himself down among them. A glance at his weapon was enough to show how it had been possible to distinguish its report from the duller snap of the Mauser. The gun was longer and heavier, and had been improved with a Remington lock, but nevertheless it was a weapon which modern warfare would have summarily rejected. About this, as about everything else, Jan had his own opinion, and this he now expressed to Zimmer, who, as he lay beside him, yawningly asked him why he always dragged that old crock of a gun about with him everywhere.

"In the spring," he said, "they tried to foist one of their new-fangled things upon me. Yes—ha, ha!—it was certainly nice and pretty, and so light; but at the first shot I fired the nut fell back, and the powder flashed up in my face. See here"—and he pointed to his weather-beaten old face, and stroked one of the scars with his finger—"my little granddaughter often counts them; there are seven of them, and the stuff is still in my skin. It doesn't look pretty, and folk who don't know me might easily think I don't know what it is to handle a rifle."

He shook his head despondently, and his long white locks fluttered for a moment in the breeze.

"No, I don't like these new guns," he went on; "not at all! It was a miracle that some of the powder didn't get into my eyes; they are bad enough as it is. I can't read my Bible without spectacles any longer, and even with them it is difficult enough."

"But there must have been something wrong with that new gun," argued Zimmer; "you should have got yourself another."

"No, I wasn't going to do that," answered Jan energetically. "The old guns have helped us before, and they are good enough for us now. I had a worse one

than this at Majuba, but it did good service all the same."

He carefully wrapped a piece of oiled leather round the lock, and assured himself that the shot-plug was in the mouth of the barrel.

"No," said old Jan, "these new guns are only invented by foolish young men who imagine that they know everything; but God has given the old guns victory before to-day, and He knows more than all men together. It was to let me see that He does not like these new inventions that He let the powder spurt up in my face. So I mean to obey Him, and I will never touch the new guns again. The old ones have served us against the Kaffirs, and against the lions and elephants; we have beaten the English with them; it isn't the first time that I have shot rooneks myself."

"But with the new ones one can shoot farther," urged Zimmer obstinately.

Jan van Gracht pursed his lips into a smile of contempt.

"Those who understand those things better than I may use them," he said. "I, who am old, will stick to the old ones. I am not in such a hurry; I prefer to wait till the rooneks come within gunshot—it is much more convenient."

Zimmer, who was the son of a German who had immigrated twenty-five years before, knew the old Dutch Boers too well to continue the controversy. He knew how impossible it was to turn these stubborn old men. He had encountered this same stiff-necked obstinacy among others of them, and he could see how greatly these white-haired elders of the people were mistaken in many things. But he was unable to do anything in the matter. He was sensible of the danger that lay in this holding fast to all that was old, but when he opposed it he was invariably confronted with the unchangeable argument: "God does not wish it, my lad!" The old men walked only in the well-trodden paths, and their sons and grandsons followed in their footsteps with the same imperturbable tranquillity.

True, they did not seek to force their views or their beliefs upon others ; but neither did they permit others to shake them a single jot in theirs.

Suspecting nothing of the younger man's thoughts, Jan van Gracht took out his brass-rimmed spectacles, polished them with a corner of his coat, and set them on his nose. He then pulled out his well-fingered, dilapidated Bible, and when he had found the place where he had left off the night before he held out the book so that the light of the fire should fall upon it. He read his customary chapter half aloud, and when he had finished he folded his hands like a child, and muttered his evening prayer and blessing. Then, with a loud snap, he shut up his Bible, and stuck it in his saddle-bag, which he disposed as a pillow ; then, wrapping a blanket round his shoulders, he lay down to sleep.

"This has been a hard day," he said to Zimmer ; "I feel tired."

Zimmer lay with his elbows on the ground, his head supported by his hands. He had known Jan van Gracht from childhood, and when a little boy had sat on his knees ; but now the old man seemed to him quite another being.

"I shot two rooneks to-day," said Jan, looking the young man steadily in the eyes. "First that officer who looked so fine, and waved so bravely with his sword. It was a beautiful shot, considering the distance and that my eyes are no longer what they were. The other was a little fellow with a piece of plaster on his face. He looked seedy and wretched. The rooneks have poor men. He got a bit away from the others when they started to run, after the big guns began to speak. I called out to him to stop and surrender, and then he took aim at me. I fired and hit him in the leg, and down he went. I thought of giving him another bullet ; there are too many of these rooneks, and they have no business here. But then I pitied him and let him be. 'Perhaps he is his mother's only son,' I thought, and I would not bring sorrow on a woman. So I shouted to him to lie still, and then I went

up to him and gave him a drink out of my flask. I think he thought I was going to knock his brains out with my gun. But I didn't—why should I? But I took his rifle and smashed it in pieces against a stone, and hid his cartridge-belt under a bush, so they won't do any more harm."

Zimmer listened half absently to the old man's chatter. Although young, he was an educated man compared with Jan van Gracht, and he had already foreseen how a war between two such unequal opponents must turn out. But he was unalterably resolved to hold out as long as any of them, for loyalty was one of the chief traits in his character, and he never forgot that he had joined voluntarily when his whole district, to a man, took up arms. He knew that his old father, who had been through the war of 1870-71, would have been fighting by his side now, had he not seriously injured one of his legs shortly before the war broke out.

"Yes," said old Jan, pursuing his own thoughts, "there is a terrible lot of them, these Englishmen; I should hardly have thought there were so many people in the world. But perhaps it will go the same way as before. At Majuba there were two hundred of us, and we lost only one man; the enemy were twice as strong, and not half of them came out of it. We shall have to pick them out one by one, like to-day—like we did at Colenso, at Modder River, at Stormberg, and all the other places. I have forgotten their names; it is so difficult to remember them, and I am getting so old. It will be a hard job, of course, but now we are getting used to it; and when we get more men the others will begin to stop and ask themselves whether it is not they who are in the wrong. I have heard it said that their Queen is a very good-hearted old lady. If she could only get to know what is going on out here, she would soon enough tell her generals that there must be an end to it. Of course you know, my boy, that she certainly knows nothing of all this; her ministers, or whatever they are called, have completely deceived her. They tell her that black is white, and white black; but

when she gets to know that so many men go out and never come home again she will begin to take the matter to heart. It cannot be pleasant to her to see her men dwindle away, for, as I say, she is a right good woman. And our Lord, who has placed her where she is, will surely enlighten her as to the true state of affairs. And all the other kings and queens in Europe—and there must be a whole lot of them—will surely tell her that her people suffer, and that another people suffer still more. She is very powerful, you know, and everything depends upon that. A kind-hearted woman does not sacrifice thousands of men's lives to do a wrong to others. No, my boy, you are not clear about this business ; but it is, at least, quite certain that one who holds such an important position as a king, for example, must be anxious for his subjects to do what is right and to be well off. These exalted men and women even exhort their ministers daily to do that which is right ; they read their Bible and follow its commands. There may have been some bad kings and queens, but you can read in the old Testament how it fared with them. Yes, the world is indeed full of wickedness and deceit—that is a sad fact ; but if only the kings knew of it, there would soon be an end to all the misery. What else do you think they are there for ? There is nothing else for it but that the Queen—God preserve her!—shall learn the rights of what is going on here. In the meantime we must hold out, and that we can manage to do. Haven't we got those new guns that you think so wonderful ? ”

Jan's eyes twinkled with satisfaction, for he had found an opportunity to give the young man a closing thrust.

Zimmer shrugged his shoulders, and did not trouble himself to reply. This old man thought like thousands of others, and yet the stern facts of the situation, grim and unpalatable as only reality can be, were staring them in the face. Perhaps they would have their blind eyes opened the very next morning, and receive a punishment so severe that they would not be able to survive it. This much, at least, was certain : that many were already tired out, and had withdrawn from the struggle to save what was still to

be saved from the general wreck. But old Jan was one of those who would have remained true to their convictions even at death's door ; he was happy, for he was content with his lot and his own narrow limitations, and never saw more than he wanted to see.

The German looked thoughtfully over to the spot where the officers were sitting with his leaders. Van der Nath's giant shadow could easily be distinguished among the others. Yes, the Dorneburg district had indeed chosen the best leader it could have found, seeing that old Zimmer had broken his leg, and was not therefore fit to take the command.

Presently Jan van Gracht drew his blanket closer about him, and shut his eyes like a good child. So long as he felt his worn Bible beneath his head and his gun by his side, he knew no fear. In a few moments he was in a sound and dreamless sleep ; he had done his best that day, and if to-morrow he should fall, the Lord would take him to Himself in His glorious heaven, and give him a place at His right hand. This was his steadfast belief, and in the strength of that belief he slept or fought, always happy and tranquil in mind.

The captured soldiers and non-commissioned officers had settled down in a sort of corner formed by the waggons at the middle of the curve which they described. They were about six hundred in all, and included the Irish Dragoons, the mounted infantry, and the men of the convoy captured by du Wallon. About a fifth of them were wounded, which showed that they had not surrendered without a struggle. They had received endless attention from their captors, and most of them now lay, talking and smoking, round about a dozen camp-fires. The Boers had good-naturedly given them coffee and tobacco, and they began to feel quite at home, for as prisoners they were having quite the best time they had experienced since they had come out to that part of the world.

A red-haired, broad-shouldered fellow made his way

towards the dragoons, and stood near them, attentively eyeing them one after another.

"At your service, sir!" exclaimed a corporal, who was known as the wit of the squadron. As no unfriendliness had been shown towards them he had regained confidence, and now wished to show that his side were not altogether destitute of good manners.

"Good day, boys!" answered the stranger, with a faultless Limerick accent. "How are you all getting on, eh?"

Astonished at hearing their native speech from the mouth of an enemy, the Irish Dragoons stood up and stared at him.

"You fellows are all on the wrong side," he cried; "but here stands a man who is on the right side! Look at me, you fellows! Heaven help you! You call yourselves Irishmen, and you are fighting against friends. Yes, have a good look at me, you washed-out, potato-eating green-horns! I'm Dennis O'Rooke, and I came from the Emerald Isle like yourselves!"

He was excited, to some extent, perhaps, with whisky, but also at hearing his native tongue spoken there by men whom he had never before seen. He struck himself hard on the chest, and continued—

"Here you see a man who had the roof pulled down over his head by the Constabulary, after he had worked himself to the bone for a landlord who never so much as troubled himself whether his tenants starved or not. I'll bet that every real Irishman has at least one relative that's been shot by the police because he wouldn't quit his home except by force. A true Irishman hates the English—to the devil with them, I say! But he loves his country! I'll be blessed if I ever saw bigger idiots than you fellows. It cuts me to the heart to see my countrymen fighting for a Government that has sucked the marrow out of our bones, and then thrown our carcases on the midden when we have not been able to scrape together the rent any longer!"

The prisoners formed a circle round the man, whose hot Celtic blood had made him forget everything but his

hatred, and whose words poured from his lips like a mountain torrent.

"Down here I found another country, where I got a roof over my head, and payment for my work," shouted Dennis O'Rooke, gesticulating with his arms in the air. "And now the English are coming down here as well, to take the bread out of my children's mouths. My curses on the English, I say !"

"What the devil are you talking about ?" asked the corporal, going up to him threateningly. It was not so very long since he had seen his own father taken for some nocturnal exploit, in which some landlord's mansion had been burnt to the ground, and he knew that his uncle had fallen in one of the frequent encounters with the Constabulary a few years before. But he had become a soldier, and he was bound to fight at any moment for the honour of the English Government. It vexed him that private matters like these should be discussed in the presence of strangers—strangers who could not but rejoice to learn of Ireland's outstanding accounts with England.

The Boers also crowded round the two Irishmen. They had not the least idea of the hundred years' struggle between the different races of the British Isles, and none of them knew what Home Rule was. But they had no objection to look on at a good set-to, especially as they knew Dennis O'Rooke to be a powerful fellow with his fists.

"Oh, don't you get your pecker up !" roared Dennis, quietly beginning to roll up his sleeves. "You don't know what you're about. May every Irishman that fires a shot in the cause of England burn in purgatory for all eternity ! Why are we fighting here, eh ? Do you know ? No, you know nothing. It's because a few dozen of Rhodes's hirelings got a lot of drunken miners to run about from pit to pit at Johannesburg, and get signatures to the franchise petition at a drink a name. Would you believe that, now ? I was offered two shillings myself to put down a scribble that would stand for Dennis O'Rooke, but my mother's son was no fool, I can tell you. Instead

of my name it was my brother's that got itself written, with just this little historical mistake—that he had been dead six months before! But do you think that mattered? Not a bit of it. It would take more than that to trouble these fine gentlemen! But I can tell you, my boy, that there were many honest miners who put their names down on other lists, declaring that they were quite satisfied with matters as they were. What do we want with the franchise here, when we have no real say in things at home? Give us our rights over there; then we can fight willingly, but not before. Here we had good wages under the old system, but once let the gold kings have things their own way, and see what the workmen will get then. So, if you want to fight, it isn't Dennis O'Rooke who will say no to a round or two."

At this moment Field-Cornet Westhuizen came up and laid his hand on the Irishman's shoulder.

"Never mind, O'Rooke," he said; "it's late, and the men need sleep."

"It's never too late to do a good deed, field-cornet. And this fellow needs the truth to be knocked into his thick skull."

"Come with me, O'Rooke," said Westhuizen quietly. He hated disturbances in the laager, and the Irishman had a name for creating them. While he still hesitated whether he should follow or not, Westhuizen put his arm in his, and, without more ado, dragged him away.

"I should just have liked to thrash that fellow," he shouted hotly. "That the like of him should be Irish"—

The field-cornet got him to lie down by one of the fires, and there Dennis O'Rooke was soon asleep, dreaming of the freedom of the Emerald Isle, the great hope of all Irish patriots. Westhuizen returned to the prisoners to see whether they had taken the matter amiss, but they only laughed at the man's excitement, and thought it a good thing that it had not come to blows. About politics they did not greatly trouble themselves; they were but ordinary mortals, content to go the way pointed out to them by their superiors.

The moonlight fell on the groups of men as they lay on the ground around the smouldering fires. Fatigue was asserting its rights, and silence had descended upon the camp. Only from the quarter where the wounded lay there came an occasional moan. Westhuizen shook his shaggy head and returned to the commandant. He understood scarcely half of what du Wallon had been saying at supper, but as he had shown himself to be a brave and resolute leader, Westhuizen had begun to love him with the fidelity of a dog.

The conversation round about the tablecloth, upon which a number of coffee cups and mugs had been placed, had assumed a more serious tone. Cigars gleamed, and the faces behind them looked ashy grey in the pale moonlight; but du Wallon, who was now the only speaker, absorbed their attention to the point of making them forget their fatigue.

“In the settlement of such a dispute, in which so much blood has been shed,” he said courteously, “it matters very little who is more or less in the wrong. Your diplomats have shown themselves more clever and more unscrupulous than our leaders. You have succeeded in forcing or tricking our people into beginning the fight, and thereby you have diminished the sympathy for us. But if we had not begun just when we did, you would have done so a little later, and then we should have lost so much the more. Our fault has been that we did not begin long ago; then we could have had a hundred thousand men where we now have only forty thousand.”

He paused a moment to shake the ash from his cigar.

“As for right or wrong,” he continued, “that which people see depends upon the eyes with which they see. Here I have a thousand men, and not one of them would hesitate to put his hand on his Bible and swear that you have done us a cruel wrong. Of your soldiers I hardly think one of them would hesitate a moment to stake his head on the very opposite. In your country one would certainly find several millions of people prepared to swear, as they hope for salvation, that your undertaking is a just

one ; but beyond England's borders it would not be very difficult to drum together double that number who would swear that your cause is iniquitous. I do not think that salvation is at a lower rate of exchange than usual, but I know that all of them are convinced they are in the right. No, gentlemen, everything is relative, as they say, in this imperfect world ; as for justice . . . pooh !” He had taken out a fresh cigar and lit it. He blew forth a big cloud of smoke. “You see that smoke,” he said ; “in a couple of minutes it no longer exists. That is both true and false.

“Justice has no need of cannons and bayonets to defend it ; an unbiased justice has its strength in itself—indeed, it cannot want such expedients. But further than that we have not yet got. On the whole, the world has not made the slightest advance in the last thousand years. The gloom of the Middle Ages has not been dispersed even by the spread of the electric light, and the law of the stronger dominates to-day just as it did then. To be the strongest, that is the chief thing nowadays ; to be the best signifies nothing. The politics of the present day are precisely similar to those of the past ; they are characterised by nothing but an entire lack of humanity and morality. And as for our boasted civilisation, have we really so very much to boast about ? Our advancement consists mainly in the invention of instruments and mechanism which increase a hundredfold the effect of man's evil passions. We stand just about where the ancient Romans stood immediately before the fall of their Empire. Our politics are the same as theirs, with the one difference that we envelop our brutality in the most repugnant hypocrisy. Christianity—more's the pity !—has advanced only a few individuals. As a race, and as a mass, we remain stationary at the same point where our early forefathers stood. But we try to imagine that religion explains a great deal, and excuses the greater part of what we do ; and when we fail to make others believe as we believe, we take care to visit our sins of omission upon the sceptics. All that can be said against war has already been said by

Christ, and by men before His time. We know it well, but war exists for all that. Why cannot we pull ourselves together to be honest, seeing that our inveterate dishonesty is exposed to the light of day? Yes, tell me why! And tell me, at the same time, why human beings should be the only enemies of humanity. But why waste our time about this? The coming generation, with its clearer understanding and more exalted views, must judge of all that. I do not think our little nation need fear the verdict. That we shall be vanquished in the end is without doubt . . . ”

At this point Westhuizen muttered something disapprovingly, but du Wallon merely smiled and continued quietly—

“ . . . but fortune in war confers no rights except for the moment; that the stronger shall win is a natural law, but it does not go to prove that the weaker was in the wrong.”

Lieutenant Kennedy made a movement as if he wished to interrupt the speaker, but, changing his mind, he sank back again in silence and apparently unconcerned.

“ If you have no objection, gentlemen, said du Wallon, after courteously allowing a few moments to pass, so that the lieutenant might speak if he wished, “ I shall take the liberty of quoting a few sentences from the work of an English author which some time ago fell into my hands :—

“ “ The most abiding and least costly conquest that England or any other country can make is the conquest of people’s understandings and hearts. Such a conquest needs no garrisons and no fleets; it encounters no opposition, it drags no one from his labour; it might stretch from pole to pole, and yet every Briton might remain peaceably by his own fireside. England’s strength does not lie in armaments and in aggression, but in the wide establishment of her industries, in the life-giving expression of her high civilisation. There are tracts which she cannot seize, islands which she cannot keep; but there are no islands, no tracts, no kingdom, no continents, which she cannot win to her and keep for ever at her side by speaking the magic words : “ Be free ! ”

“ “ Every country whose love of liberty is endorsed by

England, every land which prevents the violation of its liberties, becomes hers—becomes England's trusty ally, a willing tribute-payer, before everything a steadfast friend. Principles knit together what coercion sunders.'

"There," said du Wallon, "we have a programme which, in my opinion, is well worth a sacrifice—the sacrifice that consists in making might give way to right, if, indeed, that is a sacrifice at all. But how has mankind acted? How does mankind still act? Every war is a step backward in the path of general progress. This war is something more, for it violates every conception of right and wrong, every canon of religion and truth. It cannot be anything but wrong that a nation—small, no doubt, but still a wholly united nation, and with its merits as well as faults—should go under, through the mistake of another nation. What I have just said regarding England naturally applies to every country. But it is strange that, even among thinking persons, the interests of nations are supposed to be opposed to one another, while those of humanity are common. How can such a thing be possible? I appeal to you yourselves, gentlemen. Our race has everything in common, and yet it proclaims that war is a necessity. Seeing, therefore, that every war can only be regarded as treason against humanity at large, it must follow, as a logical necessity, that it is a yet greater offence against the subdivision of mankind, against the nation, whose existence the particular war happens to threaten.

"What, then, has this war brought about? Before I answer my own question, I may be permitted to say that I do not count myself among the so-called believers. I am quite an ordinary man, but as such I claim ordinary rights, and, first and foremost, the right to speak out my opinion.

"Gentlemen, this war shows that our religion and yours exists only in the imagination, and perhaps not even there. For what is the worth of a religion that cannot prevent war—of a religion that, in spite of its existence for nearly two thousand years, has never been able to prevent its most important commandment from being openly scoffed at, as it is in war? I consider myself an educated man, and as

such I am a man of peace—and, by the way, gentlemen, what do you say to the fact that education nourishes disbelief, but creates believers in peace? But my own opinion on this subject is of little moment; the cause of peace stands high above the approval or the disapproval of mortals. That sacred cause is part of our religion. A war is, therefore, not only an attack upon the justifiable existence of another nation—if it had no right of existence then it would not be there—but also a direct attack upon the existence of God. He who declares war, or causes another to do so, says point-blank, ‘I have no belief in God; He does not exist’—I am speaking to intelligent men, so it is unnecessary for me to develop the point more fully. We are therefore confronted with the sad duty of certifying the non-existence of religion as such. What now goes under that name I will not trouble myself about. For either there must be belief, and then war is an impossibility; or else war exists, and then religion is equally inconceivable. According to the fruits one judges the tree; according to the deeds, the belief.

“Again, for the same reasons, we are forced to judge civilisation. It has not fulfilled its mission, or kept its promises. In speaking of our ‘civilisation’ we include, of course, education, progress, and inventions, together with a mass of other things which it is not necessary to name. That this civilisation of ours is only a thin garment that barely conceals the coarse limbs of the barbarian is proved by the ever-progressing armaments of Europe. Against wild beasts that have only the lowest instincts to obey, and against bloodthirsty Kaffirs without moral feeling, one may well hold oneself in readiness to meet violence with violence. But against highly educated and Christian fellow human beings that should be unnecessary. The very conception of civilisation implies it. It ought not to be necessary for a people to think of defending itself against a civilised neighbouring country—no, it ought not to be necessary. And yet, what is the state of affairs?

“By these never-ceasing armaments the European nations simply admit that they have no faith in their

neighbour's moral conceptions, that they doubt her principle and her honour ; and each nation gives the others the right to doubt her own in the same fashion. No one considers it degrading that all this distrust should be so openly shown ; all think it only natural that one should be prepared for all eventualities. But of what value is a civilisation that aims at nothing but to be the strongest ? Civilisation, therefore, gives us not the least guarantee, and the best we can do with it is to strike it out of the account, for it is merely a spurious label behind which there is no real existence. And why should we respect a civilisation whose only gift to a hungry and impoverished people is an army organisation ? The old nations of the world must indeed be poor and petty, if all their Governments can give them is a project of conscription !

“ No, gentlemen, let us confess honestly that we are lacking in the most elementary notions of right. An honest nation does not take the life of another. Let us confess that we have no religion ; in saying so we shall at least be scoffing at nothing. And let us, first and foremost, be done with this boast of civilisation, when we only show ourselves to be raw, murderous barbarians. Once more, gentlemen, I appeal to your sound common sense.”

“ Excuse me, sir,” said the English army doctor with dignity ; “ we have remarkably good ambulances, and we tend the enemy just as carefully as we do our own men. Does that signify nothing ? ”

Du Wallon looked up, and a fleeting smile, which expressed both pity and disappointment, passed over his face.

“ Yes,” he said, “ it signifies a good deal, doctor. It is an admission which it is well worth paying attention to. It means that we have committed an ugly mistake, which we seek to put right in our usual manner — by a compromise with our conscience. It proves that we have not entirely succeeded in making inert that portion of our being which is usually but too pliable. Don’t you think, doctor, it would be better to make ambulances superfluous by ceasing to wound and kill ? That love of mankind which manifests itself within the limits of certain conventions

which cannot possibly be carried out to the letter ; which takes the form of nursing those of our fellow-creatures whom we have only half-succeeded in killing—for, of course, we should have preferred to kill them outright ; that love, I say, is nothing but an utterly inadequate payment on account of our liability for the crimes that are perpetuated by every war. Can one imagine anything more inconsistent than first to wound a poor fellow, and leave him for half a day to go through all the terrors of death, coupled with the most insufferable bodily anguish, and then amputate one of his arms or legs and cast him out upon the world, unable to make a livelihood and compelled to starve ? No, we are going back instead of forward ! ”

The doctor gave a grunt of dissatisfaction, but did not reply. Major Foley yawned without attempting to conceal it ; he did not find the commandant anything like so entertaining as half an hour ago. The other officers sat still, stiff, and discontented. They were all of them men who had reason to consider themselves well educated for their time. They troubled themselves very little about religion—nowadays it was the fashion not to show oneself to be religious ; and, indeed, they would have been quite ready at any time to admit that regard for their own comfort played no insignificant part in their indifference.

Du Wallon guessed what was going on in their minds and smiled.

“ Well, what is your opinion ? ” he asked, turning to Major Foley.

“ Excuse me, sir, but I am a soldier.”

“ And as such you need no religion at all ? ”

The major was obliged to hesitate a moment before venturing to reply. His questioner was too sharp for him. Then he said, looking around him proudly—

“ My religion is my flag ! ”

“ And mine,” answered du Wallon, “ is my native land and humanity.”

There was a short pause, broken only by the doctor’s grunts of disapproval. Then the commandant said politely—

"It is late, and I am sure you gentlemen would like to rest."

"You are not mistaken, sir," said the doctor ; "thank you for a pleasant evening, and good-night!"

Du Wallon sent Field-Cornet Westhuizen with them to show them where their quarters for the night had been prepared, and the officers followed him with ill-concealed impatience at having been obliged to listen to what they contemptuously called a sermon—"a confoundedly tiresome, Sunday-school discourse," as the major muttered grumblyingly.

"All their leaders are just the same," said Lieutenant Kennedy aloud to his nearest companions ; "they rant about everything betwixt heaven and earth, and him who talks the most they choose as their leader. It is really strange that they should be able to defend themselves"—His voice was drowned by the tramping of feet, and soon all had disappeared in the darkness of the laager.

Du Wallon looked after them for a few moments ; he shrugged his shoulders, and said to the field-cornet who stood beside him—

"An Englishman never knows when he is beaten. As a national characteristic that may be a very fine thing, but it has its disadvantages too. But wait a bit ; this war is not over yet, and before it is over they will have been taught many useful lessons. This war . . . The most prosaic nation in the world got itself entangled in a net of intrigues which miscarried. One cannot but admit to their credit that they possessed but little qualifications for that kind of business. The nation, discovering this, became nervous, and cast every consideration to the winds, and so the war came about. War!—what an upheaval does it not bring in its train! How it turns everything upside down! To fall and disappear from the world—what does not that mean to a man? But to know that he leaves his wife and fatherless children to the mercy of a triumphant enemy—that is about the worst thought life can have in store. May none of us learn what it is to be struck down by a fate so crushing ; may none of us ever have to go

through this!—and yet . . . What else have we to expect?"

The missionary went up to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Look upward, commandant!" he said, and he raised his hand to heaven.

"No, it is too far away."

"Not for those who sincerely and humbly seek the truth."

"Can you look, and yet believe in an almighty God?"

"Yes," answered the old man simply, but with sincere conviction.

"Ah! how happy you must be"—

"There is no more happiness for me—I have seen too much. But in spite of all I believe in a glorious future, with peace and reconciliation. No statesman has the power to prevent the fulfilment of the Word of God!"

"I only wish that my sight were as strong as your faith; then everything would be so much easier."

The missionary was just about to answer, but du Wallon made a gesture as if wishing that the matter should be allowed to rest, so the old man desisted, knowing that he had to deal with one who had laid down his course and had set himself inflexibly to follow it. He knew, therefore, that here, as in so many cases, there was nothing to be done.

From the unfathomable depths of heaven the moon shed its gentle light over the sleeping earth. The men stood silent and motionless. The commandant was deep in thought, but when he heard Westhuizen returning he again began to speak.

"When the war broke out," he said, "I was away in the midst of civilisation. I awoke from my selfish ease, and I recalled to mind these African plains over which I had ridden in my childhood on my little pony. I thought of the small number of my countrymen, and I imagined that nothing was to be looked for but the most crushing defeat. I made my way out here—for my place is here—and everywhere I found men, women, and children ready to offer

their lives for the freedom of their fatherland. I took my place in their scanty ranks, and I am proud to be here. The honour of being the son of a country whose entire male population equals in numbers the half of its enemy's mobilised army, is too great to renounce. As I stand here, in the centre of the field of action, I see the greatest fiasco in the history of war. Our enemy, who has all that we have as well as all that we lack, has put in the field two men to every one of our males—boys, grown men, old men, some of them over eighty, and children at their mothers' breasts, all taken together. We have a great problem to solve; we will show the small nations of the world that none are too weak to maintain their independence."

He was silent for a moment, and look dreamily out over the landscape. Then he stretched out his hand and described a great circle.

"What's your opinion, Westhuizen?" he asked. "Isn't this a country one can die for?"

"It is better to live and fight for it, commandant."

Du Wallon smiled strangely. He foresaw the end of it all, but still it pleased him that one of his men should cherish such a blind belief in the future.

"What do you think, Van der Nath?" he asked.

"If it is not given to us to live for her independence, then we must die for it. That is what I was thinking yesterday"—He paused, but no one observed that he seemed to be about to add something.

"Then we must do what we can!"

"And life and death lie in a mightier hand than our enemy's!" said the missionary.

Nothing more was said, and in a few moments they silently separated and went to seek rest.

Over the plain shone the pale light of the moon, and a cooling breeze sighed plaintively through the dry branches of the karoo bushes.

CHAPTER VII

THE COMMANDANT

A COOL morning followed the calm moonlit night. A thin mist hung round the tops of the kopjes and gradually sank lower as the day advanced; and when at length the sun rose out of the clouds that concealed its shining disc the mist fell in pearls of dew upon the karoo bushes and the sand.

For some time the camp had been wide awake, and all were busy with the new day's work. Some Boers from another district had done their tired-out comrades from Dornenburg the service of digging a grave within the walls of the deserted kraal. There, where the men had fallen, they should also sleep their eternal sleep. A few paces off another trench had been dug, and this was to receive the bones of those of the enemy who had fallen.

The burial ceremony was simple, as such ceremonies usually are in time of war, when every moment is precious. About a hundred dirty and ragged Boers had gathered round the grave to see the Dornenburg burghers take a last leave of their friends and relatives. Amid a deep silence the bodies, wrapped in coarse coverings, were borne to the grave and lowered into it. The old missionary stepped forward and read the usual prayers, sprinkled some earth upon the bodies, and read a chapter from the Bible, promising that all should one day meet again in a better world.

Afterwards came Jan van Gracht, as the oldest member of the community. He pronounced a blessing upon the dead, and finished his little speech as follows:—

"They are not dead, they only sleep. And from heaven, where they have now gone, they look down upon us, and expect of us that we shall do our duty and defend our fatherland as bravely as they did." He looked round at the group, his eyes glistening, and his long locks waving in the wind. "And what does it matter," he asked, "if we should all fall, even as these have fallen, if only our land be free? Friends and comrades," he shouted, "of what value are our lives if the soil on which we tread is not our own? And if the English take our country,—and as long as we hold out they cannot take it,—the day will soon come when each one of us will wish that he were lying dead here with these, rather than have lived to see it."

Lastly came Van der Nath. He was unaccustomed to clothe his thoughts in words, but he was moved at the sight of these men lying stiff and lifeless, for he had known all of them as good neighbours and industrious workers. He had thought much during the night. He went to the side of the grave, and spoke of each man by his name, recounting his merits. This done, he prayed that their dust might rest in peace, and then he prayed, with the tears running down his cheeks, that God might forgive all those who work each other evil, for life had not been given to mankind in order that it should be wasted on the field of battle.

The Dornenburg burghers stood with bared heads, and looked on while the earth was thrown over their comrades. Others of the Boers went off to see the burial of their fallen enemies. There was, however, little to see. The captured officers had not considered that there was any clergyman in the camp, and so they had not thought of asking his services. A lieutenant and thirty men had been told off to the burial as a guard of honour, and they stood and looked on calmly—almost unconcernedly—while a few soldiers filled up the grave.

When the grave of the dead Boers was finished, their living comrades brought stones to lay upon it; nor did they rest until the pile had reached a considerable height. Then quietly and solemnly they returned to the camp.

The field-cornet and old Jan remained behind for a time, praying silently for the dead; then they followed the others. Behind them stood the high pile of stones, a monument to the fallen dead, but also a warning sign to the living, who, seeing it, might know what they had themselves to expect.

"I am going home," said Van der Nath suddenly to his companion.

Jan van Gracht stopped and looked at him in astonishment.

"Are you too getting tired of it?" he asked reproachfully.

"No, Oom van Gracht, but—I don't know what is the matter with me. I don't see things in the same light as before. It is as if my sight had suddenly come back to me. I fancy I have begun to think for myself again. You see, Oom van Gracht, when everybody is shouting that the enemy must be swept into the sea, it isn't so easy to keep a clear head. One talks like the others, one thinks as they think. But the poor fellows they have just buried over there were not enemies of mine. I never knew them; I have never looked one of them in the face. I don't know whether they were good men or bad, but I know for certain that I have shot one of them. Who was that man, Oom Jan, who was he? No—I have been going about in a dream—I have shot and killed in my dream! But now I am awake! It cannot be right for me to kill my fellow-creatures, children of the same Creator who created me. No, no, Oom Jan, no, no! I'm going back home!"

"The rooneks have no business here," said old Jan vehemently. "If they like to go away quietly, I will not shoot them either. But if they run against me, then snap goes my rifle!"

"You have sons and daughters, Oom Jan; they too have many children"—

"Yes, our family is a big one," answered Jan, with a laugh of satisfaction at the thought of his numerous progeny.

"Yes, there are many of you. But the Lord has said He will visit the sins of the fathers upon the children—think of that! It is a great sin to take another man's life, and"—his voice sank to a whisper, and into his eyes there came a light that compelled Jan to look away—"I have only one son."

"You can marry again whenever you like," answered Jan. "The whole district wonders why you have not done so long ago."

"I don't want to talk of that."

"Well, well, don't be so violent, Abraham, don't be so violent. There will be plenty of widows after the war, and besides I know many a young girl who would gladly sit up¹ with you."

"Do you not understand that there is none good enough to be a mother to little Isaac?"

"No, no; I don't understand at all what you are talking about. We are here to drive the rooneks out of the country; that is the chief thing. But I understand well enough that if the field-cornet of the district runs away to sit at home there will soon be many others who will come away, one after the other, to do the same. And how will things go then? No, friend Abraham, you are downcast because so many of us have fallen; but that cannot be helped now. I too am very sorry for it. I am especially grieved that Piet Muller's grandson has fallen; something might have been made out of that boy if he had lived. Do you remember that mill he built three years ago? They came a good way to have him grind their corn. No, Abraham, get rid of those dark thoughts; maybe they are the effect of colic, and that I can cure.—There comes de Vlies—just listen how the men are cheering him. Talk it over with him—he knows everything. We all know what it is to be homesick; none of us can be quite free

¹ In Boer courtships it is customary for the swain and his sweetheart to sit up a whole night in each other's company. If the girl selects for the purpose long candles that will suffice to last out the night it is a sign that she regards the young man's suit favourably, but if she takes short candles, which soon burn out, the young man is expected to take it as a refusal.

from it. And home we'll get, right enough, if only we can get the rooneks under our feet. Speak to the commandant if he has time to listen to you. But keep away from the missionary ; he is a good and pious man enough, but he has such strange ideas sometimes."

Van der Nath shook his head wearily, and followed old Jan, who with long strides hurried off to the camp.

It was indeed the commandant's troop that had arrived. There was much noise and dust, and the men's joyous shouts showed how they had been longing to see him. Their beaming faces and their waving hats showed how blindly they relied upon him. The long column came swiftly from the pass southward. The cracking of the whips and the rumble of the waggon wheels mingled with the shouts of the Kaffir drivers, the thud of horses' hoofs, and the clank of arms and harness. A broad way had been cleared right through the camp, and the new detachment passed through in order to take up their position as vanguard.

"The commandant scents a fight, or he would not hurry so," said one of the onlookers to his neighbour.

"Yes, he knows where to find the rooneks."

"He knows everything."

And what these had said most of their comrades thought. Commandant de Vlies was one of the few Boer leaders who had thoroughly understood how to win the blind confidence of his men. Whenever he said a thing was to be done, no one ever thought of remonstrating.

On a hillock stood du Wallon and Westhuizen, while the captured officers had stationed themselves behind them. They were given all the information they asked for, and gazed in astonishment at the mass of men and animals that came streaming into the camp.

First came a few hundred horsemen with a young field-cornet at their head. He waved his hat as he rode past du Wallon, and in a moment he was gone. After his troop came a large detachment of dirty, sunburnt fellows. These leaned forward over their horses' necks, while their saddles creaked, and the dust formed a dense red cloud around them. They were succeeded within a few minutes

by a column of waggons, among which could be seen the Kaffirs with their glossy faces and shining white teeth. The drivers cracked their whips, shouting and whooping far more than was necessary, evidently enjoying the opportunity of making as much noise as they liked ; and they had good lungs. Next came the artillery, composed of six quick-firing Krupp guns and five machine guns. The gunners were silent and grave, and they smiled contemptuously at the hubbub made by the Kaffirs.

Between the passage of these and the arrival of the next detachment some time elapsed.

"The irreconcilables," said du Wallon gently to the officers.

There was deep silence among the onlookers as a troop of about two hundred men came riding forth from the pass. They were men who had been hardened in a hundred fights, men who laughed aloud at danger and scoffed at death even when face to face with it. Their farms had been burnt, their families were scattered ; no one knew where they were to be found. Each man possessed nothing but his own life, and had sworn to lose it rather than lay down his arms. When they had heard that Commandant de Vlies had sworn likewise, they gathered round him from every quarter. With bleeding hearts and eyes flaming with hate, they had come to him from north, south, east, and west, and told him their troubles. And so they had banded themselves together under him, for he promised them a sure revenge.

A few paces ahead of them rode the commandant, a broad-shouldered man of medium height. He differed in nothing from the men about him ; his appearance and dress were like those of the others. And yet there was a difference : while his men looked about them with alert yet gloomy glances, his eyes gazed straight ahead, as if fixed upon some unseen point far away in the distance, and his lips were so firmly pressed together as to suggest that not a word had ever escaped them. He reined in his horse at the spot where du Wallon stood as if awaking from a dream, and gave a command in a short, sharp voice.

A few men emerged from the swarthy band ; a couple galloped quickly backwards, another couple rode on ahead, and the rest of the troop rode steadily onward. It seemed to all a simple reminder that they must hold out.

De Vlies rode up the hillock and shook hands with du Wallon. He scanned the prisoners, and asked how many there were ; when du Wallon told him, he nodded.

There was now something in the nature of their surroundings which the captured officers had not previously observed among the Boers. A freedom of speech was prevalent in the camp, which did not at all accord with their ideas of military discipline, but in the presence of de Vlies all their criticisms were silenced. His name was mentioned in a whisper, and men avoided his eye as timid schoolboys shun the glance of a strict though popular master. Above all, he was instantly obeyed, an extraordinary thing in the Boer army, which had no idea of discipline. He seemed to shed about him an indefinable atmosphere of mystery ; his movements were brusque and decided ; his voice subdued, yet keen ; and at times his eyes flashed forth a light that caused the strongest men to tremble. The story of his reckless determination, of his inexhaustible resource under difficulty, and of his dauntless courage in face of all manner of danger, was the talk of all the camps, and men tired to death, who, in hopeless despair, had been on the point of succumbing to a superior force, had gained fresh strength when they talked of de Vlies. And he was always letting them hear of him. They were not yet entirely beaten ; they had still two men upon whom they could rely —de Vlies and Botha.

The English officers looked curiously at the man who had stimulated in such a lively fashion the imaginations of their newspaper correspondents. They exchanged looks expressive of disappointed expectation. Was this simple, plain-looking horseman really their dreaded antagonist ? When they observed his fixed look which, having no visible goal, seemed to lose itself in space, they smiled compassionately. He certainly did not look like a man who could concentrate his thoughts.

De Vlies awoke from his day-dream and, turning to du Wallon, said—

“The prisoners must be sent north at once. They can be taken on the ox-waggons. David Steen leads the column ; he has already got my orders.” And as du Wallon seemed about to ask some question, the commandant added shortly and decisively : “All is in order ; see that it is done.”

Du Wallon signed to the officers to accompany him. They had seen from the commandant’s tone that he did not mean to permit any objections. Here they had met a new personality ; they had heard a man speak who knew what he wanted. Having seen him at close quarters they began to think that there might, after all, be some truth in the rumour of the burnt-down farm and the wife who had died of fright with her new-born child at her breast. Silently and downcast they went towards the unknown that awaited them. But behind them sat de Vlies as if carved in stone.

The ammunition and provision waggons rattled through the camp ; the silent horsemen rode past the motionless man with the stern face. The air was filled with the clamour, but de Vlies neither heard nor saw, although his large, lustreless eyes were fixed upon the marching troops. Although present in the flesh, his thoughts were far away. But for the men it was enough that they saw him.

Commandant de Vlies had a force of about three thousand men with which to operate against thirty thousand of the enemy in his immediate neighbourhood, and at the same time to harass the enemy’s line of communication with the main body to the south. The almost incredible speed with which he marched his little army from point to point enabled him, in spite of his immense inferiority in numbers, to inflict great losses upon the English. Although he was followed by an overwhelming force, he wriggled, slippery as an eel, out of every danger. He avoided all fighting in the open, for that would have been madness. He was never to be found where looked for, but where no one expected to find him, there he always was. He had carried the Boer tactics to a pitch of perfection which the Boers themselves

had never imagined to be possible, and he even seemed capable of developing them still further. Although for two months he had been constantly surrounded by the enemy's army, he had yet succeeded in holding it in check by making its position so precarious ; he had also captured several convoys, taken prisoner here a company and there a battalion, and had besides found time to pull up the railway line and cut the telegraph wires.

For a considerable time he had stuck like a leech to the back of the English, paralysing their movements. Then, finding their numbers overwhelming, he had suddenly vanished among the inaccessible mountains to the north-east of the Orange Free State.

Two hundred thousand men gave a sigh of relief, and the English generals at length saw their way to a couple of nights' undisturbed rest. Things seemed to be settling down, and preparations for the great advance were energetically hurried on. The detachments that had been chasing the omnipresent but never-to-be-found de Vlies were recalled and sent on to Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Presently the heliograph, which also had had a few days' rest, began to work again. De Vlies had come out of his hiding-place. A battalion of Yeomanry had disappeared ; a party of mounted scouts were missing ; a company of Militia had been cut to pieces ; a newly repaired railway line was nowhere to be found ; and an ammunition convoy was never heard to reach its destination. Bad news rained down upon headquarters ; and to all questions there was but one answer—"de Vlies."

The great forward movement which was to crush all resistance was postponed indefinitely, and the wild chase began again. The English troops were sent hither and thither. Weary and panting, they stumbled about the country. Awakened in the middle of the night by gun and rifle shots, they were never allowed enough time either to eat or to sleep. They therefore accomplished nothing, and that because their officers were even more alert and indefatigable than the enemy. Some of the officers would prepare an exceedingly clever plan of operation. When

from three different sides they had scaled the range of hills among which de Vlies had last been seen, they found nothing but a few useless and broken-down waggons that had once belonged to the English, a dismounted gun of similar origin, and a few hundred disarmed soldiers—likewise English—who came towards them cursing and swearing, and holding up their trousers, from which de Vlies had conscientiously let his men cut every button.

De Vlies never did what any other soldier in his place would have done ; on the contrary, he baffled every calculation. And when, a week later, he again made things hot for the enemy, he once more disappeared as suddenly as if he had sunk into the earth. But in another week he had jumped up just as unexpectedly, a hundred miles away, and excited a rising in a district which the English papers had reported as being settled some months before. And the consciousness that they themselves were the cause of all this did not serve to make the generals milder ; the punishment for their sins of omission was allowed to fall upon anyone within reach.

The long procession of men and waggons had now entered the camp, and de Vlies rode slowly down from the hillock. Those who had just arrived now formed the vanguard, while those who had been first in occupation formed the rear. He intended to march next morning towards a point which no one knew but himself. No one was in his confidence, and so the projected movements of his troops were never mentioned or discussed ; his brain worked out every plan unaided, and everything was subject to his will. He dominated all his associates, all of whom well knew that, while there was no reward to look forward to in any case, stern punishment would befall anyone who did not fulfil his duty.

“I have no son,” the commandant had said ; “my wife died of grief. I myself will fight on to the end.” Other reasons for his acts he never vouchsafed.

The irreconcilables who, like their leader, had lost their all and lived only for vengeance, followed him like faithful dogs. Upon the little peasant army, who spent their time alter-

nately singing psalms and reciting passages from the Old Testament, they produced a gloomy impression. For this chosen band such things as privation and difficulty had no existence ; to hunger and hardship they were thoroughly inured, and fighting was their only pleasure.

“To-morrow,” said de Vlies to the men about him. They knew what this meant—“Rest all you can to-day ; to-morrow I mean to try your strength to the utmost.”

An oppressive silence gradually took possession of the previously noisy camp. Even the chatter of the Kaffirs was almost hushed. De Vlies rode about everywhere, followed by his most trusted men. The firm-set mouth did not relax, and neither censure nor praise came from his lips. Whenever anything was not as it should be, he merely fixed his eye on the delinquent ; his glance silenced all excuses, and the defect was immediately put to rights. Then he rode on, showing himself now on this side and now on the other ; at one moment he was in the middle of the camp, and the next on its outskirts. His cold, stern eyes would from time to time shoot forth a lightning flash, and in a moment he was gone again.

When the party which was to conduct the prisoners to the north was about to start, de Vlies was there watching everything.

“Steen,” said he in his sharp, penetrating voice, “if any prisoner attempts . . . shoot him down !” And with a husky laugh that resembled the rattle of bones, he added—

“The Englishmen have taught us warfare !”

The sharp expression disappeared, and once more his eyes assumed their tired, absent-minded look. But presently he roused himself out of the thoughts that were always tormenting him and never left his fevered brain in peace !

“I shall never forgive Botha for preventing his men from shooting the English who fled from Spion Kop !” he exclaimed. “He saved the lives of several thousand English, but how are we repaid ? They kill our people, and burn our farms . . . burn our farms . . .”

He turned his horse and rode away, muttering, “Dead men . . . burnt farms . . . burnt farms !”

The convoy with the prisoners set off northwards enveloped in a cloud of dust, the latter sitting silent and despondent in the waggons. The hard face of the commandant, which seemed incapable of any expression but impenetrable grief, had scared them. But de Vlies had already forgotten their existence; he wanted them out of the way as quickly as possible.

He rode on, receiving reports, giving orders which only those nearest him, who were most in his confidence, could interpret, inspiring all with his feverish energy. And still his lustreless eyes were fixed upon some unseen point in the distance. It seemed as if two entirely different natures were embodied in him—the absent dreamer and the stern man of iron.

A Kaffir came forward between the horses, and with the familiarity of an old and faithful servant laid his hand on his master's knee.

"Baas, breakfast!" he said.

"Thanks, Bambo, but I haven't time now."

"Baas eat!" continued the Kaffir, with insistence.
"How Baas get on when he not eat—what?"

"Well, be quick, then!"

The Kaffir smiled and showed his white teeth as he took his master's horse by the bridle. A tent had been erected in one corner of the camp, and to this de Vlies now withdrew. Although his little army slept under the open sky, and he himself did not mind doing the same, yet he was accustomed to spend two hours out of the twenty-four in solitude. From Bambo, who was always in close attendance on his master, to whom he was most devoted, the Boers had learnt that de Vlies was in the habit of spending these hours pacing incessantly up and down, muttering incoherently and wringing his hands.

"He sees their eyes," whispered the Kaffir mysteriously.
"Everywhere, day and night, he sees their eyes!"

The men knew what he meant, and shook their heads sympathetically. Many of them had gone through too much not to hate, blindly and inexorably, as mankind will, the whimsical manifestations of an incalculable destiny;

but this unexampled, never-slumbering despair, which caused their commandant even to forget his sleep, was incomprehensible even to them.

“But he has his Bible,” said most of the men.

But Bambo appeared not to hear them.

“He sees their eyes!” was his only answer.

And now de Vlies paced restlessly up and down his tent as was his wont. Three paces in one direction, and three paces back again; three paces . . . three paces. He did not even glance at the maize cakes and the dried meat which his servant had placed on a block of wood beside him. His eyes seemed lost in that far-off past from which it was impossible for him to escape. He wrung his hands like a condemned man; he tore his beard and muttered words that came half in supplication, half in bitter scorn.

“Shall I never be able to forget . . . forget . . . forget?”

Bambo stuck his head through the opening in the tent, and said—

“The pastor.”

“Let him come in!”

The black woolly head disappeared, and soon afterwards the missionary entered.

The Kaffir sat himself down before the entrance, drew his knees up to his chin, and began to keep watch as he had often done before. He could not hear what the two men within said to each other; the sound of their voices reached his ears only in an indistinct murmur. He was not the least interested in what they might have to say. Bambo was not so inquisitive as most of his fellows generally are. But he began to feel uneasy when he heard the missionary’s voice upbraiding his master and earnestly imploring him to do something, to which the commandant irritably answered “No.” Bambo grew angry, and began to ask himself half aloud why this old man should dare to annoy his master in this fashion. He did not like this conversation, and began to wonder how he might put an end to it. It was, therefore, with a brighter look that he greeted a new arrival.

"Baas Van der Nath," he said, "my Baas very glad to see you—at once."

"Is he alone?"

"Pooh! Only the old pastor in there. He plague my master with talk about—I not know what. He be very glad to see a friend. I open at once." And before Van der Nath had time to think of stopping him, he stuck his head into the tent and shouted—

"Baas Van der Nath here. He want"—

"He is welcome!" said de Vlies.

And with his mouth stretching to his ears, Bambo crept out again, and signed to the field-cornet to enter.

Van der Nath did so. He entered just in time to hear the commandant say—

"No, no, Pastor Schmidt; we must say no more about this. I am now the only one whom the people still follow. Do you imagine that I could break faith with them and surrender? And even if I did, do you think our enemy would cease to persecute us? You know us, pastor, and you know that we love peace and peaceful work; but we will not submit to be driven from house to house. You may say as often as you like that the struggle is hopeless; I answer none the less that as long as I live and breathe it shall not end. We are free men, and as free men we will be treated."

Meanwhile Van der Nath stood at the entrance unnoticed. De Vlies went on vehemently—

"You mean well, pastor—I know that. But you know heaven better than you know earth. And we who live down here must go on as we best can. War is a terrible thing—the ugliest and most brutal thing one can imagine, and those occasions which it gives men to show their courage and their contempt of death can never avail to palliate its many crimes. I tell you, pastor, that hell itself is preferable to our life now. . . . Here we have terror-stricken women, parentless children, dead men, and burnt farms . . . burnt farms! What are the butcheries of actual warfare compared with that which is done between them? Would you like to hear one episode of this war? There was a man

who once thought as you do. He had vowed that his hand should never touch a weapon. The punishment of the Lord fell upon his country ; he resolved to keep out of it all, and hid himself away with his young wife in order to escape it. The fool ! He did not know what war is, for who, do you think, can escape it ? One day, after the district had been declared under military law, a troop of the enemy's soldiers came to his farm. They were tired and hungry, and took everything they wanted without asking permission. The owners protested. 'We have nothing to do with this,' they said ; 'let us keep what is our own.' A beardless young fellow who commanded laughed aloud at their plea. 'Don't you know that there is war in the country ?' he asked. And to show his power he ordered his men to set fire to some buildings that were near at hand. 'We are all shivering,' he said ; 'we want a fire. And this is war—now you will know it.' What did it matter to him who were the inmates of the buildings ? He did not trouble himself about that. He only performed what he would have called his duty. He had to execute the orders of his superiors, and he, just as little as they, knew the people he had to deal with."

De Vlies no longer needed to summon any fugitive thoughts, for he was now speaking of that upon which his whole mind was centred. His eyes flashed fire, and he flung forth his words with the wild vehemence of a desperate man. But it was less the words, than the despair with which they were animated, that impressed his hearers so deeply, and caused them to stand staring at him spellbound.

"The man I speak of turned to the young fellow to whom a gruesome fate had given the power over life and death, but who did not appreciate the responsibility that should go with it. 'Spare my farm, sir !' he implored ; 'in the house there is a woman who is about to become a mother !' No one heeded him. The men were furious —why, he could never tell—and they set the place alight. It was a fine blaze. The old house, where son after father had lived for many a year, burned quickly. Only

by exerting his utmost strength did he succeed in saving his wife from the flames. She saw the fire, but understood nothing. Her eyes stared wide with terror. She fell to the ground. Her child was born. It gave a faint cry, and was dead. The mother herself went mad in the arms of her husband, and died by the glare of the burning homestead. The stranger had already gone his way ; he had not believed what the man had said, and had not taken the trouble to discover whether the man had lied or not. And alone in the night, the man stood beside the bodies of his wife and child—his child ! forsooth !—he had never had a child !

“ That is war, my old friend !

“ Whose work was it ? Fate or hell—who can tell ? The beardless youth thought he was doing his duty ; his men obeyed him, and thought they were doing theirs. What was done was done by no one in particular, yet by all. The young man obeyed his orders, his superiors theirs. No one did it—no one, and yet everyone. No one can point out the guilty one. If he had not done it another would have stepped forward in his place. No one did anything, and yet this happened. It is war ! But what happened when that farm was burnt down and that woman perished does not belong to this war in particular. Such things have happened in every war, and they will happen many times again. If no one can be charged with it, then everyone must be, and every man between the rising and the setting of the sun is equally guilty of it.

“ What, then, has war taught us, my friend ?

“ It has taught us that there is so much evil in mankind that there is no room left for the good, that man is so full of emptiness that there is no room for thought. Do not come with your admonitions to me. Go to the enemy, and tell them to lay down their arms. Go to them—they who pride themselves on their lofty culture and the steadfastness of their religious faith—go and speak with their clergy, and hear what they have to say !

“ But that night the devil took possession of a man, and since then he has roamed about the earth like a cursed

creature. His Bible is gone—it was burnt ; his faith he has forgotten. But one line of Scripture he remembers, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' That is written in letters of fire before his eyes. With other men as desperate as himself he hunts over the plains of his country, and beside him, invisible, rides Death swaying his keen-edged scythe. Everywhere he sees his wife's eyes, with the fire of madness in them, as he saw them before death came to her release. But when the guns thunder and the rifles crack, then he is himself again. When blood flows in streams and curses rise to heaven, then he finds oblivion for a few hours, and his greatest joy is to see the enemy's possessions in flames ; to destroy, to burn down, to annihilate—that is his only mission. He rides through the land, and behind him bleach the bones of friend and foe. He rides and rides, but ever before him he sees the mad, glazed eyes of his dead wife. They are always just so far away that he can never reach them. No matter how swiftly he may rush onward by day and night, through fire and blood, they are always at the same distance, just . . . just as far . . . far away !

"There is war in the land, old friend. How then can you talk of peace and reconciliation ? Has anyone begun to speak of it ? No ; blood must still flow, death-cries must still sound ! We must fight for life and death—fight to the last gasp ! That is war, and it means hunger and hardships, pestilence and infamies, robbery and murder—dead men and burnt farms ! "

His eyes streaming with tears, the missionary went over to Van der Nath.

"Be strong, my son," he said, "be strong ! "

"Strong !" shouted de Vlies. "No, be hard—hard as iron ! Do not hear, or see, or feel—forget that you were born to be a human being, or else you are worthless as a soldier." He controlled himself with a great effort, and stretched out his hand to Van der Nath, whom he only now appeared to see, and said in a tone that formed a curious contrast to his former vehemence, "Good day, Abraham what do you want ? "

Van der Nath grasped his hand firmly and tried to answer. He had prepared himself for the conversation, for he knew his friend the commandant, and he knew with what severe eyes he looked upon those who deserted their post.

In this army, where all served willingly, it was nothing unusual for fifty or a hundred men to betake themselves off home for a time, and then return whenever they should find it convenient. It often happened, however, that they remained away altogether. But the war had now entered upon a new phase. The days of the big battles were over, and those of small engagements had arrived. In spite of their attenuated numbers, however, the determined courage of the Boers enabled them to delay the ultimate victory to which the English statesmen beyond the sea so anxiously looked forward. In the north Botha hovered like a cloud charged with electricity; de Vlies operated in the west along with a few other daring commanders. De Vlies had need of all his men, and this Van der Nath well knew. And now that he must say what he had come prepared to say, every word had gone out of his head. What possible purpose could it serve to reason with a man who lived only to nourish his despair and gratify his revenge? He therefore clutched at the words which the commandant had uttered before the missionary had gone out.

"I know myself to be a human being," he said.

"What do you mean, Abraham?" said de Vlies, planting himself before him. When he came to look at the field-cornet a little more closely, he saw that he had undergone a great change in the last few days. "What," he said, "are you, too, homesick?"

"Yes," answered Van der Nath, going straight to the point. "This life is hateful to me. I cannot go on killing! —no, I cannot!"

"But who can, do you think, Abraham? We are not civilised enough for the business; we are only rough Free State peasants. You are happy to be able to stop when you like. I must go on whether I like it or no, and"—He fell back a step or two, and stared at Van der Nath's head as if he beheld there some terrible vision.

The field-cornet was perplexed, and raised his hand to the top of his head, for the commandant's gaze appeared to be fixed there.

"Abraham," said de Vlies hoarsely, as he wiped some drops of sweat from his forehead, "don't go! Stay here; your friend asks you!"

Van der Nath shook his head.

"Well, then, do as you will. I cannot help you. But you will come back, I tell you—you will come back, like the rest." And as Van der Nath again shook his head, he whispered, "I see her eyes—above your head—hers and the child's. You are doomed! You will fall in the war—you and your son!"

"Isaac . . . my boy!" It sounded like the last despairing cry of a drowning man, and the strong man clenched his fists, as if prepared to defend the dearest thing he possessed.

"There is war in the land, Van der Nath, war and misery. The battlefield with its waste of human life is as nothing compared with all the rest. Our hands are tied, our wills exist no longer; we are ruled by something else, evil powers that stalk about, here . . . all around . . . everywhere. The terrible part of it is the great lies, the innumerable crimes. Don't speak, Abraham, don't move! Now I see her eyes again, and the child's, which never was born. Take great care of your son; guard him, I tell you. You are both doomed, and it will be something terrible, for I have never seen her eyes so near before."

"If a father's devotion can protect his son, then my Isaac is safe from all danger."

"You have no will, Abraham. You are bound hand and foot—all of us are, men, women, and children. Over there in London sits the man who controls your life and your son's, and he does not know of your existence. There is war in the land, and in war-time all is possible . . . all . . ."

"Farewell," said Van der Nath quietly, holding out his hand. "Now I must go home . . . for Isaac's sake."

The peasant commander pressed his hand, and whispered—

"You too, Abraham—you and all . . . we are all doomed; you, and your son, and all . . . all . . ."

"No! If two strong arms and an honest will count for anything, the boy shall certainly live!"

De Vlies laughed hopelessly as Van der Nath stumbled out, and as soon as he was alone he again began his restless promenade.

"I have never seen her eyes so near before—never! What can it mean? What do you want of me, wife?"

Pale and trembling, Abraham Van der Nath made his way through the laager, silently praying from the innermost depths of his heart—

"Not my boy, O Lord, not my boy! Take my life instead, but not the boy . . ."

He was too agitated to think of anything but the commandant's gloomy prophecy; he forgot all else. He gave himself no time to bid farewell to the man who had given a new direction to his life; he did not take leave of his friends as he had intended to do. He ran towards his horse, hurriedly saddled it, and rode away, murmuring—

"Not the boy . . . not the boy! . . ."

PART II

CHAPTER I

IN A CONQUERED LAND

IN the midst of the plain stood a lonely farm, a low, rectangular building with two small windows in front, and between them a porch, the roof of which was supported by four unpainted posts. Round the farmyard, sparsely covered with grass, ran a low, narrow brick wall. The house, too, was of brick. A little farther back could be seen a cart-shed, and behind that a stable and some small outhouses roofed with corrugated iron,—a latter-day innovation,—while the main building itself had to be content with its old thatched roof.

The morning sun glittered on the small window-panes of the lonely house, and round about, far as the eye could reach, stretched the great barren plain. Not a sound disturbed the deep silence, and not a human being was to be seen except the solitary figure of a horseman which had just made its appearance on the horizon.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a big beard that completely covered his chest, and a pair of small kindly eyes that were fixed lovingly upon the low building far away before him. His dirty overcoat hung in rags about his big limbs; his face was black with gunpowder, and across his forehead he wore a dirty bandage. He had pushed his broad-brimmed hat well back upon his head, and had thrown out his chest, as if the particular air that he was now breathing gave him peculiar pleasure. The horse was like his master, shaggy and covered with

dust, and his bridle was old and worn, but when he heard his rider's shout of encouragement, and saw the house rise up out of the ground, he gave a neigh of recognition and quickened his pace. After a short gallop of about two miles they came to a halt outside the brick wall of their home. The rider tightened the reins, and looked about at every object, one after another, with such an expression of affection in his eyes that it seemed as if he would have liked to caress every one of the rough logs of the shed. Then he said—

“My home !”

He nodded towards the house, slipped down out of the saddle, and led his horse off to the stable. He shook his head thoughtfully, for about the empty stalls there was an air of neglect and gloom. But his pleasure at finding himself home again was too great to permit anything to disturb his good humour. The horse, which had gone into one of the stalls, turned half round as if to complain of his master's want of attention, and this served to rouse him from his reflections. From the hay-loft he dragged down an armful of hay and placed it in the rack, and from a bin beside the wall he took a measure of corn and emptied it into the manger. Then he patted the horse on the neck and said—

“There now, old fellow ; eat away ! We have had a bad time of it, both of us, but we have done the best we could.”

Then, patting the animal once more, he left the stall.

He had got half-way between the stable and the main building when the door of the latter opened slightly, and a red nose was cautiously thrust forth. The man in the farmyard stopped in astonishment and gazed inquiringly at the door, which was presently opened a little wider, enabling him to distinguish a bald head, beneath which a pair of bleared, wondering eyes made their appearance on either side of the red nose. The eyes looked to the right and the left, and at last they discovered the man who stood all alone in the yard, waiting. The man in the doorway started as if he had seen a ghost, and the

door was suddenly closed, only to be opened wide, however, the next moment.

For a short time the two men looked at each other, both equally surprised ; the man in the doorway with a scared look in his stupid eyes, the other with undisguised anger in his.

“What are you doing here ?” the latter asked at length, coming nearer.

The other did not answer, but took a long leap from the door right out into the yard, and began making for the opening in the brick wall. Evidently he did not quite know what he was about ; he ran as if for dear life, and the extraordinary fear that had so suddenly taken possession of him had lent his lank body the strength necessary for the effort. When he had got outside the wall he stopped and turned back with a terror-stricken look in his face.

“Van der Nath !” he gasped.

“What do you want here ?” shouted the latter for the second time, stooping suddenly as if he had thought of lifting a stone and throwing it after the runaway.

The fellow leaned panting against the wall, and a malicious grin distorted his ugly face. He was just about to reply, but when he looked round and saw that they two were alone, he thought better of it, and continued his flight across the plain.

“Thief !” shouted Van der Nath after him contemptuously.

The other man stopped, and, thinking that the distance between them was now sufficient, he shouted something in return, which the field-cornet understood to contain a threat that they should certainly meet again.

Van der Nath stood for a moment in uncertainty. Should he mount his horse, ride after the fellow, and compel him to say what he meant, or should he allow him to escape ? He shrugged his shoulders. What harm could such a miserable drunken wretch do ? As he ran off, bareheaded and his coat-tails flying behind him, he cut quite a comical figure. Still Van der Nath was far from satisfied at having come upon this man in his own

house. He scratched his head reflectively, for he could not but think it very strange. Well, he must let the matter be; and first and foremost, he must embrace his son, so, longing to press him to his breast, he crossed his own threshold.

There were in the house only five rooms, of which the largest was used as the kitchen. He passed through the parlour, with its simple furniture—two unpainted tables, six rude chairs, and a large sofa—glancing gloomily at the place on the wall where his rifle had once hung. It was no longer there, for there was war in the land, and in the end the conquerors, for security's sake, would be sure to confiscate it. Van der Nath opened the door leading to the next room, and entered.

A loud shout of joy greeted him, and his son threw down the harness which he had been busy polishing, and rushed into his father's arms.

For a long time father and son held each other in a close embrace, and when the first moments of joyous surprise had passed, Van der Nath pushed the lad a few paces in front of him and said admiringly—

“How you have grown in these months, Isaac!”

And he was right. Although the boy was scarcely thirteen, he was as tall as a full-grown man, but his limbs were as yet tender and undeveloped.

Isaac straightened himself up, glad at the pride which his father's words expressed, and went over to the doorway to show the mark that had last been cut there. Since then he had grown a whole finger's length, and Van der Nath laughed like a child when he saw it.

“When you can add on a few more years, Isaac, then . . . ha, ha, ha!”

And both laughed, long and heartily. Then followed the inevitable questions. In a few grave words the father gave an account of the fights he had been in and the adventures he had experienced, and Isaac listened to him with flashing eyes. Then, in his turn, he related with a child's effusiveness all that had happened while his father had been gone. He mixed great events with small, talking

now of the affairs of the neighbours, now of the effects which the war had brought in its train.

The Kaffir servants had all gone off, the men to the English army, the women goodness knew where. Oom Maas' cattle had disappeared ; it was said that the rooneks had commandeered them ; why—well, he supposed they required food as well as the owners. Of all the farm hands there was no one left except old Betty, the Kaffir cook, and she hid herself away in the loft as soon as she heard a suspicious sound ; probably she was there now in the corner of the fruit-loft over there to the left. She imagined that the soldiers shot all the blacks. Aunt Van Gracht was dead, and not a man had followed her to the grave except Erasmus Flick and his three sons ; but they could not manage to carry the coffin, so very heavy was she, and her three daughters had to help. They had also been obliged to fill up their mother's grave, for Erasmus and his three sons had to ride off suddenly in consequence of the appearance of an English detachment in the neighbourhood. Everywhere the Kaffirs were behaving shamefully ; they stole food and spirits wherever they knew there were no men at home, and did even worse mischief. A farm by the church had been burnt down, and the blacks were blamed for it, although some thought that some drunken soldiers had set fire to it in order to revenge themselves on Van der Walt's women-folk. Their sheep-dog had also been shot because he had barked at them, and the sheep—well, Isaac had been to Oom Muller's that day, and when he came home he found there were no sheep left in the kraal except two that had been shot. That was what the enemy called hunting ! The lad spat contemptuously as he spoke of it. He had much more to tell, and all of it was bad news for the home-comer, and Van der Nath's face became clouded as he listened.

“Dornenburg,” continued Isaac, “is in the hands of the English, and they have had a small detachment by the church, but I don't think they are there any longer. The whole district is declared in a state of siege. What that means I don't know, but Oom Muller says they have done

it so that they may take from us what they like unpunished. As if they could find anything more to take ! There is hardly a horse in anybody's stable, and all the kraals over the whole district are empty of cattle."

"And Blenkins, what has he been doing here ?" asked Van der Nath, when he had listened to all Isaac had to say.

"He has helped me with everything. If he had not come here I could never have managed alone. As soon as you had gone, father, the Kaffirs laughed straight in my face if I told them to do anything. They said that the English had forbidden them to work for us Boers ; they were telling lies, I suppose, as usual."

"Did they obey Blenkins ?"

"No ; but his being here prevented them from doing any harm."

"Has that fellow been living here—in my house ?"

"Yes ; are you vexed about it, father ?"

"He is a thief, Isaac !"

"No, no, father ; that is a mistake. Long ago he led a bad life—he has said so himself ; but he was converted at a meeting in Bloemfontein, and now he is a believer. He told me all that old story, and I know all about it. I have not had a single secret from him. He always says I am quite a man, and we have been quite good friends."

"You are a child, Isaac, a simple child, and you believe that everyone else is good. Possibly Blenkins has been a better man lately, but why did he run away when I came ? If it is as you say, I would willingly shake him by the hand, and ask him to forgive my bad thoughts of him."

"Do so, father !" exclaimed Isaac joyfully, "do so !"

"Well, we'll just wait and see ; now there is nothing to be done but wait."

There was, indeed, nothing for it but to wait and see what time would bring. Many and hard were the trials that the war had brought with it to the scattered farms, in which only women, children, and old people were left. All work was at a standstill. What, indeed, could the inhabitants do ? Who could or would do anything in such

an unsettled state of affairs? When the railway had been laid through the western districts, the people found the eye of the enemy constantly upon them, and a heavy hand was laid upon those who were compelled to remain in their homes. A gloomy despair took possession of them; the men were silent, the women followed their example, the children ceased their play, and life slipped past upon a path that was both new and strange. "Was it not all already over?" people asked themselves. First and foremost, was it wise to attempt a struggle with an enemy who was constantly fetching fresh troops from England, from her colonies, from every corner of the earth, while on their side every man who fell was one family bread-winner the less?

For some time past they had seen endless trains laden with infantry, cavalry, artillery, ambulance corps, and engineers passing through, day after day, like some steady, inexhaustible stream, on their way to the north. There was neither beginning nor end; the columns stretched away for miles, and the rumble of cannon-wheels and commissariat waggons never ceased. The stream had grown to a mighty flood; it was a year since it had begun to flow, and it seemed as if it might well flow on for another ten years.

From behind his window-panes Van der Nath beheld these gigantic military preparations, and behind other panes sat other men, their eyes wide open with wonder. They asked themselves how they had been able to withstand such a manifestation of power on the part of a nation that proudly called itself the foremost in the world; and as they were continually hearing of the immense numbers of the enemy's forces, now running into six figures, and compared them with their own small number, they became anxious and despairing. They knew that similar streams were rolling onwards in the same direction by other roads, and, feeling that the last shred of resistance up there in the north must now be broken, their hearts were bowed down with sorrow and grief. And when at length reports of the enemy's victories reached them, old men cried over the

news with their wives and daughters ; they wept over their Bibles, and prayed with burning zeal for but a single ray of hope. But nothing came except telegrams telling of defeats among the mountains of the Republic, and the complete annihilation of the last armies left to them. They bowed their weary heads, closed their tear-stained eyes, and yielded themselves to the inevitable, for there was nothing else to be done.

But in spite of the news of victories for the enemy that met them everywhere, in spite of the great losses sustained by their friends, the stream that flowed towards the north never ceased. Cannon and baggage columns rattled continually onward in the same direction ; the trains dragged along their fresh battalions ; and all the while the reinforcements kept arriving in long files—all to be sent up yonder. At the same time another stream flowed southward. In railway carriages and on ambulance carts the wounded were borne down by hundreds ; transports arrived daily with invalids who were borne onward. Pale and emaciated, their faces stared from the windows ; fever-stricken patients raved in their delirium ; a whole army of sick-nurses worked until they were ready to sink with exhaustion, and yet they were unable to accomplish half of what was absolutely necessary.

Behind their windows the old men began to shake their heads thoughtfully and to exchange significant looks. If their friends were already beaten, then why all this prodigious display of strength ? If their last resistance were broken, whence came all these pitiful trains of invalids ? A new light came into the dull eyes, a smile of satisfaction played over the sad faces, and more than one of the old men allowed their thoughts to dwell upon some spot where a fine Mauser rifle and a few hundred cartridges lay safely hidden.

“ Isn’t it all over yet ? ” whispered the women, and their lips, rigid with bitter sorrow, were opened to give vent to their uneasiness.

“ They are still holding out, the fine fellows ! ” said the old men, and their faithful hearts, that had been in peril of

breaking with stifled anguish, now beat quicker with a great new-born hope.

They had been bent to the earth, and reverses had deprived them of the remnant of their strength, but now it seemed to return to them of itself. There were signs of disturbance in the district. After darkness had set in the boys gathered together in small groups ; an English patrol was shot down, a telegraph line was cut, and a picket of six men and a non-commissioned officer disappeared without leaving a trace. The leaders in the north, who knew their people better than they knew themselves, had not reckoned wrongly in thinking that their own tough endurance must reawaken the slumbering power of resistance elsewhere. The big battles were reduced to their proper proportions ; the number of fallen Boers, which was an expression of the pious hope of imaginative newspaper correspondents rather than the truth, fell nearly 50 per cent. ; and the bulletins of victory, in a war where victory so often ended in the retreat of the victors and the advance of the defeated, were estimated at their true value.

Presently there came fresh news of risings, and another and stricter proclamation was issued to remind the district that it had already been declared in a state of siege. To give the proclamation more emphasis cavalry patrols scoured along the roads, pickets of infantry were quartered beside the church or in the house of the elder of the parish. And as a natural consequence of all this the state of restlessness rapidly increased. The victors did everything they could have done to excite the animosity of those about them, and those who considered themselves still unvanquished made use of the victors' blindness for their own profit. Boers who had long been thought dead by their relatives would pop up unexpectedly. They would creep up to their farms at night and then disappear again as mysteriously as they had come.

“Botha is not conquered ; de Vlies is marching this way ; hold out !” exclaimed a ragged and dirty Boer whom Mrs. Bothman had at last recognised, but with difficulty, as her youngest son. He obtained half a dozen maize

cakes and then rode away, while his mother sat herself down and wept tears of joy.

“Give them all the trouble you can!” shouted a bearded fellow with one eye, whose features reminded old Gert van Soelen of a son who had been his a little more than half a year before.

“Yes,” he said, “it is me, father. Give me a bit of food, and don’t bother to look at the door like that. The rooneks have something else to think about just now; we have given them plenty to do down this way as well.” He wiped his mouth, patted his sisters on the cheek, and was gone.

“You don’t stick at it enough; out east the English are having a tough job of it!” laughed a lanky Boer with a dirty bandage about his chin, as he embraced Mrs. Van der Hoochte right in the front of four tall wenches, who had a decided impression that when their father had left them a year before he had looked entirely different. “Sannie and Sara don’t shoot so badly; why haven’t you a rifle hidden in the garret like the women up north?” He kissed the girls, upon whom it had at length dawned that this wounded, weather-beaten man was indeed their father, filled his saddle-bag with corn, and rode away.

The district, which an English general had reported three months before to be completely pacified, now began to give the Commander-in-Chief great uneasinesss. He transferred the former officer-in-command to the front, and sent in his stead another, charged with the express mission of restoring order, a sufficient number of troops being placed at his disposal.

There was no time to be lost; the new commander resolved that there should be no leniencce. He gave all his officers to understand that severity was the only proper policy. War is war; and a couple of days later old Van Delft’s farm was burnt to the ground, and the old man and his three daughters had to live upon the compassion of their neighbours.

The whole district was enveloped with a spirit of gloom and hate. The patrols pressed against the inhabitants at

every point like an inflexible and tightly laced strait-waistcoat, and the nocturnal visits of friends and relatives entirely ceased. But the whisper went round that shots were not infrequently exchanged on the veldt. Aunt Sannie Van der Walt even maintained that she had seen three wounded Lancers carried past her house; but as she was known to be the worst gossip in the parish, nobody troubled himself about her stories, although all derived some comfort from the thought that it might very well be true.

In the following week another farm was burnt down. The disaffected must be taught a lesson, and old Piet Muller, who had long been one of the elders of the community, was ordered to appear before the chief of the English police troops. That morning Piet drank immoderately of Boer brandy; then, having harnessed the only horse he had left to his cart, he took a touching farewell of his numerous family, and drove off.

"You are one of the elders here?" began the police officer, as soon as Piet Muller had been ushered in.

The old man nodded. He had all his life been a lover of peace. His chief anxiety was ever to avoid all manner of unpleasantness, and it was on account of his modesty and gentleness that he had been chosen as one of the elders. He expected no good to come of his visit, and the incivility with which he was received only served to confirm him in his belief.

"A man of your years ought really to know the danger to which the district is exposed by the encouragement of all the trouble that has been going on here for so long." And the officer brought his fist down upon the table before him, making old Muller nearly jump out of his shoes.

"Now there shall be an end to all this disorder," he said, "so now you understand! We don't mean to let you keep a whole division tied down here because of these cursed tricks of yours. Tell me at once who it is that lies out at night and shoots at our patrols!"

"I am an old man and know nothing."

"Don't talk rubbish! You Boers all hang together like

a tangle. And you, Muller—you know enough to give us hints that would be valuable. If we may pay you for them, you have only to say so. England stints nothing."

"I am a poor man, sir, but if you think I am to be bribed you have come to the wrong man. I have heard, of course, that you succeeded with"—

"Nonsense! If you won't do it willingly, then . . . you have yourself to blame if you are forced to do it. We have means enough to bring rebellious peasants to their senses, and if need be we do not hesitate to fire a farm. Yours will be the first, so now you know it. The country is conquered, and we mean to keep it; and now you know that also."

To this Piet Muller answered nothing. He met the officer's angry eye with a questioning look, and prepared to go.

"Stop where you are, man!" shouted the officer in a fury. That very day he had received a severe reprimand from the general in command, and his wrath was not a thing to play with. "Do you imagine that we are at war to please you, or ourselves? Oh no! If the district is not quiet in a few days' time, you will come to repent it. Tell me, now, how many men fit to bear arms are there in the parish?"

"At the moment there are not ten between the age of eighteen and sixty. They are all of them off at the war."

"The war is over, I have told you. Bloemfontein and Pretoria are both occupied. Who the deuce ever heard of a nation continuing to fight after its capital was in the hands of the enemy? You have not a handful of men under arms; you have neither army nor money; and yet you go on like madmen. The whole country is quiet, do you hear? It is only here that you keep on giving us trouble at night."

"I know nothing," said Piet quietly. "I have only heard that Botha is in the north, and that de Vlies is on his way here."

"The devil he is! Are you mad, fellow?"—"What do you want?" he said, turning to the door, through which an

orderly, stiff as a poker, had just entered. In reply, he began repeating a message he had apparently learnt by heart.

"Orders from headquarters," he said. "De Vlies is thirty miles west of Bloemfontein, and threatens communication lines. The general is making a forced march against him with all his available troops. You, major, with three companies of the police brigade, must occupy the district while the general is engaged elsewhere."

The glance which the officer gave the orderly was anything but mild, and that with which he measured Piet Muller gave evidence of a wrath which was probably far from pleasant to endure. But the old man stood quite immovable, seeming neither to hear nor understand.

"You are not kept badly informed, friend Muller," he said, keeping his anger in check, and signing to the orderly to go. "Since it seems impossible to get a sensible answer out of you, I must take the matter into my own hands. My duty and my country's interests do not allow me to look through my fingers, and you may rest assured I shall not. Now, listen to me. You, Piet Muller, must call together all the elders of the community."

"There is only one besides me at home, and he is very ill."

"Indeed!" The officer took a paper from the table and looked at it. "Where is Mattens Wollen, eh?"

"Dead. No one has been chosen in his stead."

"And Jan van Gracht?"

"With de Vlies's corps. There you will find him, rifle in hand."

A sharp look met Muller's gentle, childlike gaze, but he sustained it without flinching. He wondered afterwards how he could have been so courageous that day.

"No doubt it is useless asking after the others?"

"The less you ask, the fewer unpleasant answers you will get."

"Very well, we will let the matter rest. There are better ways than pumping such an old stiff-neck. Listen, now, to what you have to do. By the day after to-morrow you must call together all the men-folk outside the church."

"It is a long way there, sir."

"If the fathers of families are not all there, your farm will be burnt. Now, you can go."

"I thank you, sir, for giving me two days to gather my possessions together."

"What do you say? Do you refuse?"

"I cannot do it, and I will not."

"Are you not one of the elders?"

"Sir, it was my countrymen who made me an elder. So long as I bid them do what is for their good they will obey me, right enough; but if I were to go errands for the enemy—and that shall never happen—they would spit at me, and quite rightly, too. Sir, I am close upon ninety. I am too old to go over to another camp."

"Go, Muller; your talking alters nothing. If the men are not at the church on the day after to-morrow, you may expect the worst."

Piet Muller's wrinkled face betrayed neither fear nor hope. He left as quietly as he had come. In his cart he folded his weak, withered hands, and prayed meekly, while the Kaffir boy whipped up the horse to a half canter.

The officer stamped frantically with his foot, and then went over to a door at the back of the room. He opened it and shouted irritably—

"Come here, Blenkins, or Jenkins, or whatever you call yourself!"

"Sisyphus Blenkins, colonel," answered a voice insinuatingly, and the same fellow Van der Nath had chased from his farm crossed the threshold. He was dressed in an elegant suit of a by-gone fashion that had plainly not been made for him, but had been bought at some second-hand clothes-shop. He had on a pair of black gloves, which also were not in the best condition, and disclosed the tips of his fingers. In his hand he held a shabby, much polished tall hat and a cheap walking-stick. He approached the table with something of the air of a whipped hound, and then stood still in a studied position, with one leg thrown over the other, steadyng himself against the corner of the table. Everything about the man indicated a moral

and physical wreck—the stooping back, the shifty watery eyes, and the shuffling gait. He was, in fact, one of those unfortunates in whom one saw at once the habit of suffering humiliations and the certainty that he was not deserving of anything better.

The officer eyed him contemptuously from head to foot, and began curtly—

“That was good advice you gave me! Of course you have been listening to my conversation with that obstinate old man?”

“Oh, colonel!”

“You know very well that I am a major.”

“I know very well that the major ought to have been a colonel long ago.” The fellow smacked his lips as if he had just tasted something very delicious, and grinned with satisfaction at the happy care with which he had framed his words.

However fulsome his flattery might be, the major let it pass without remark, but he had a sufficient perception of the fitness of things not to betray any appreciation.

“Answer my question,” he said roughly; “did you listen?”

“The colonel’s—I beg pardon—the major’s voice is so remarkably clear.”

“You heard also what the old man said?”

“Allow me to say that I foresaw the result. I also said that all kindness was wasted on these ignorant people. They don’t look upon it with the same eyes as we do—we who are accustomed to the blessings of civilisation”—

“Don’t talk rubbish,” said the major roughly. “Give me good advice if you can. But if you can’t, go to the devil! I don’t want you.”

“Oh, colonel—excuse me, major, I mean—but you must really admit that the mistake is excusable. I have the district at my finger-tips.”

He held up a hand before him, and gazed with a sorrowful shake of the head at his ragged gloves.

“I lived about here for two years before the war broke out—the war into which my dear fatherland was forced by that obstinate old man at Pretoria and his gang. I held a

secure position, and, without boasting, I venture to say that I was much esteemed by my neighbours. I should undoubtedly have remained here till my death if the complications caused by this war had not made it impossible on account of my patriotism. My nationality, of which I always have expressed my pride openly, has caused bad blood among these semi-barbarians, upon whom an Englishman has the same effect as a red rag upon a bull. I was compelled to go away, and to get rid of my property at a ridiculously low figure ; I stood helpless in the face of such injustice as had been perpetrated against me. Everybody has treated me unjustly"—here he involuntarily abandoned his submissive, insinuating manner, and banged his hat upon the table—"everybody in this district, but I am proud of it all the same, for I am an Englishman."

The officer shrugged his shoulders. He knew the man was lying, but he did not trouble himself to inquire how much. He only said—

"And now you wish to take your revenge on your enemies?"

At once the fellow relapsed into his painfully humble submissiveness ; he took his hat from the table, bowed deeply, and said—

"You misunderstand me entirely, col—major. I forgive my enemies. I will no longer think of their criminal treatment of me as an individual ; that is a thing of the past, and I bear no malice. No, it is quite another reason that has brought me to you, major ; I have not forgotten my country, and I wish to offer her my services." He drew up his lank figure, and slapped himself on the chest, so that a whirl of dust rose from his seedy coat. "I flatter myself that I am as good a patriot as any man who commands in Her Majesty's victorious army." He made another profound bow, and stole a glance at the major to see what effect his tirade had produced. But the major appeared to be utterly unmoved by his eloquence. The fellow looked disappointed, and continued in a manner a little less high-flown : "Now between ourselves, major, I admit that I seek revenge as well ; the injustice done me has been so great that I cannot forget it." It was plain

that he did not expect to be believed ; he was aiming at a certain goal, and so long as he reached it he did not greatly care about the means.

“Now I understand you better. Spare your fine phrases, my dear sir, and keep to the point.”

“The col—the major’s wish is my command. I will not venture to remind you of the services which I have already been fortunate enough to render this corps, of which you yourself are the most distinguished ornament.”

“Stop this tomfoolery ; you haven’t got to do with a woman now, and all this embroidery only spoils your case. Say plainly and shortly what you want.”

“Plainly and shortly, then, I can give you all the information you need to pacify the district.”

“Well—the best means—let me hear your opinion.”

“To crush the rebels—I can see, major, what objections you mean to make, but, begging your pardon, you have not gone far enough—not by any means. What signifies a couple of burnt-down farms ? That doesn’t make anybody homeless. The neighbours at once give the wretches another roof over their heads, and share their last maize cakes with them. Set fire to a dozen ; then they will understand—and only then—that the business is serious. And, let me add, you must seize every weapon in the district ; take even the axes and knives from the disaffected, or there will never be peace. A Boer who knows he has his rifle within reach is never to be trusted.”

“I quite agree with you in that.”

“Yes, isn’t it true, major ? In that respect the Boers are no different from any other people in the same circumstances . . . er—that is—excuse me, sir, it was not my intention to hurt your feelings. No ; put me at the head of a band of your police, and let me search the district. I know their hiding-places. Give me full powers to set fire here and there, in case they should attempt any resistance ; let me”—

“Are you out of your senses, man ?”

The fellow saw that he had gone a little too far, and resumed his humble, fawning attitude.

"It is not to show my power or to take a righteous revenge that I ask this. I assure you, it is only to show how a true Christian forgives ; it is for the sake of example that I venture to ask such a favour. It is to spare my friends the ignominy that must lie in being compelled to obey strangers who would in all likelihood not show the same patience as I. Besides, for your own safety, you must take these means of precaution, sir."

As he uttered these words there was something in his manner so utterly false and malicious, that the officer turned away from him with loathing, so that he no longer looked at him.

"What you require is utterly impossible." The major pointed to the door. "You can go."

"One other matter, major," said the man in the same cringing, insinuating manner ; "just one word !"

"Quick, then ; I haven't any time to waste."

"What will you pay the man who gives you information telling where eight of the Boer guns with their ammunition are hidden ?"

"If you know anything, man, out with it !"

"H'm," said Blenkins, assuming the most impenetrable air.

"How much do you require ?" asked the officer, trembling with nervous zeal, for such a seizure would be immensely advantageous, and open up prospects which it was impossible to comprehend at the moment.

Blenkins smiled as he looked at him, and seeing the impression his words had made he determined to improve them.

"What, major, do you think is de Vlies's reason for throwing himself in between the two English forces twice in the same month, and organising a general concentration in this direction—eh ?"

"What do you think yourself ?"

"The guns."

"And you ask for your—h'mph—information ?"

"I should prefer that the major should mention a sum."

"H'mph ! Let me think."

"De Vlies has the name of being quick at turning movements."

The major named a sum, but Blenkins's only reply was a regretful shake of the head. He increased the amount twice, and at last drew up a written promise, for whatever it might be worth, to pay Mr. S. Blenkins, formerly schoolmaster, so many pounds sterling for certain information, the value of which, it was stipulated, the major was to decide. The reason he assigned for his arbitrary course was the haste which the undertaking demanded, and the scarcity of troops which, as it then happened, existed in the district.

"Now, I suppose, you are quite satisfied?" he said, with a laugh of relief, when these formalities had been arranged.

"I am sorry to say I am not," was the reply. The major showed an impatience which it was not difficult to understand, whereupon Blenkins added: "Unfortunately I must come back to the starting-point of our interesting conversation." He stuck out his chest, drew a deep breath, and said aloud: "There is a man here upon whom I must be revenged."

"Indeed! Well—and who is that?" The promise that the major had given him was practically worthless, but it was important that Blenkins should keep to his part of the agreement, and now to his annoyance he could see that the matter was not to go through without further concessions on his part. Although the fellow was so obnoxious to him that he would have liked to kick him out, he excused his action with the aid of the well-worn maxim, "All's fair in love and war." He was right, for in time of war the most contemptible means are frequently instrumental in bringing about the greatest results, and this war had been going on long enough to deaden the judgment even of the most highly principled of men. With a doubtful shrug of the shoulders he yielded to the inevitable and inquired: "Upon whom must you be revenged?"

"The fellow is called Van der Nath."

The major stepped back a pace or two, and shuddered at the horrible look of savage hatred that inflamed Blenkins's

eyes. Recalling his responsibility as administrator of the district, he asked him cautiously—

“What harm has the man done you?”

“That is too long a story to tell you. Yes or no, major?”

“H'mph! You understand . . . My position just now”—

“I require nothing but that you should place six men at my disposal. I ask for nothing written. You are free to disown me afterwards if it amuses you; but this I must have. You may say that I have gone to confiscate concealed arms, for I shall do that also—I know the little tricks of my former friends. In this way you will do me a great service, and I will do you a still greater.”

Half won over by the fellow's persistence, the major twirled his moustache and looked questioningly at the wall, as if seeking counsel of it. At length he answered—

“Who is this Van der Nath? I haven't heard his name before.”

“He is a field-cornet under de Vlies. He came home last week. Don't you think, major, that there is something in that?”

“He may have become tired of the game.”

“De Vlies generally sends some one he trusts on in advance, and comes himself afterwards. It seems to me that is quite characteristic of him.”

“H'mph! It sounds suspicious.”

“Well?” asked Blenkins shortly.

“The police troops I require myself, and there are no others.”

Blenkins stuck his hat on his head, took his stick under his arm, and went whistling towards the door.

“What the devil are you in such a hurry for?”

“Well?” said Blenkins for the second time, laying his hand on the door-handle.

“There will be two Scotch regiments here at the end of the week; I will ask the general to lend a picket for a couple of days.”

“Scotch!” Blenkins made an ugly grimace. “I don't like those fellows.”

"Well, they can't be used for police service. Then I can do nothing more for you."

The major had reflected, and had come to the conclusion that he dared not lend his own men for an expedition of the precise purpose of which he could not be certain. As soon as the Scottish commander had effected his movement against de Vlies, his men would probably be marched off again, and the whole affair would speedily be forgotten. The thought of utilising the time and capturing the hidden guns while he alone was in command of the district would have been tempting and inspiriting if only some other person than Blenkins had suggested it. But, he thought, war is war; one enemy the less is always a gain.

Blenkins, too, had been considering, and had come to the conclusion that he had better not strain things too far.

"We had better come to some agreement," he said. "I have, of course, your certain promise?"

"Yes—as long as the guns are found."

"That shall be seen to to-morrow. And I can imagine that the sight of them will make some impression on the people. It would not be a bad idea to drive them past the church the day after to-morrow."

"Not bad, ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the major gleefully. But he stopped suddenly and, giving vent to the dislike which any decent man must have felt for the other, he shouted roughly: "Get out of this; your breath taints the air here!"

Blenkins pretended he had not heard. But he slunk out with a satisfied smile on his thin lips, for now he was on the way to his goal, and everything else was of small account.

The major spat after him as he went.

"The devil's the pity," he muttered, "that we should be obliged to make use of such vermin!" He paced up and down the floor in a rage, tugging from time to time at his moustache. Then he smiled at the thought of the guns, and said aloud: "There is war in the land, and they have themselves to blame." But still he had a gnawing feeling

that he had not handled the thing rightly. He was a man with strict ideas of honour, and as if by way of giving momentary expression to them he went over to a wash-stand and washed his hands as though to get rid of some dirt upon them. As he stood there, he happened, by a strange sequence of thoughts, to call to mind Pilate. Having dried his hands, he wetted them once more, saying : "It's a dirty bit of work ! If one could only foresee the consequences one might think twice before"— He did not complete his sentence, but shouted out to his orderly to light the fire, for he thought he felt cold.

Two days afterwards a company of police troops halted in front of the insignificant-looking little building known as the parish church. The major sprang from his horse and stretched his legs. He had chuckled a good deal during the preceding days, and he chuckled now as he ascended a hill to have a better look at a convoy that was rattling over the plain below. It consisted of eight big guns, each dragged by sixteen oxen, and behind came an English waggon bearing the captured ammunition. The major rubbed his hands, and thought of the effect at headquarters when the telegram announcing the discovery should be received.

"Not bad," he said, "not bad ; fit for use, every one of them. There's not much art in turning movements when one has one's artillery buried and can come back and fetch it at a convenient moment. That's one way of fighting, but"—

"Well, major ?" said a voice beside him insinuatingly.

"Hullo ! so you are here too, Blenkins ?"

"You will always find me where I am needed, major. And over there comes old Muller driving. Listen, now, major ; you can do me a great service !"

"H'mph ! Your claims are rather extravagant."

"Ah ! this time it is a trifle."

"Major," said Blenkins, making a futile attempt to assume a benignant and sympathetic expression, "spare Muller's farm—he is an old man."

"I never intended doing him any harm. That about the farm was only a threat; we don't fight in that fashion, my good man—not unless necessity compels." The major chuckled and rubbed his hands with the utmost good humour. "I shall myself tell him that he may go home and have no fear."

Hat in hand, Piet Muller approached the major, and gave him to understand with a gesture of regret that he was alone. None of the men, in fact, had taken any notice of the order to assemble at the church.

But Blenkins smiled mischievously and shrugged his shoulders as he crossed over to the Kaffir who had driven Muller's cart.

"Good day, Sambo, or whatever you call yourself," he began condescendingly.

The Kaffir nodded shortly. He had always been well treated on his master's farm, and he shared his master's opinion about everything English.

"Well," Blenkins went on jovially, "has your Baas said anything about his farm being burnt to-day?"

"Baas said so: 'The cursed rooneks!'"

"Not so fast, my boy, not so fast! Piet Muller's farm will stand for some time yet. He has bought himself off."

The Kaffir looked at him with large eyes, but said nothing. Neither Blenkins's manner nor his appearance inspired confidence.

"Do you see the guns over there—yes, those over there? Well, you can tell the women-folk, if you should feel like it that Piet Muller has blabbed. You see, there are more ways of saving one's farm than one."

"Baas now tell big lie. My Baas good patriot, as they say."

"Yes, my man, of course, he is. He is an honest fellow, that I know well. But when one is hard pressed . . . you understand? It isn't pleasant to see one's house in flames—no, upon my soul it isn't! And if, for instance, one says, 'Search there; I dare say it will be worth your while,' there isn't any harm in that. I don't say that Muller has done so—not at all; but he was with the major

the other day, and talked with him a long while alone. You know that well enough."

"My son Goliath drove Baas over," muttered the Kaffir slowly.

"There, you see, my man! And now look there at Muller and the major. The Englishman is shaking hands with him—ah, that means something! And look, now he is patting him on the shoulder."

"I won't hear Baas more," said the Kaffir angrily.

"You needn't. But I fancy old Zimmer or Flick would give something handsome for his trouble to the man who tells them of this. You don't think much of a hiding, I know that well enough; but if I were in your place . . . however, that must be your own lookout."

The Kaffir lowered his head thoughtfully. He obviously thought the suggestion worthy of consideration.

Blenkins left him, well satisfied with what he had done. He greeted Piet Muller politely as the old man hurried past him, and climbed into the cart, and he whistled a lively air as he saw the Kaffir cast a wondering look over his shoulder at his master.

"You seem to be in a very good humour, Mr. Blenkins," said the major, who had meanwhile come up to him and was himself in a similar frame of mind.

"I have done my country a great service," was the ambiguous answer.

The major looked across at the guns and nodded.

Blenkins looked in the same direction, chuckled, and then asked uneasily—

"Tell me, major, when are the Scotchmen coming?"

"If you keep hereabout you will get to know," answered the major. He did not like the coming of the soldiers to be chattered about by this whisky-sodden fellow, and still less was he pleased to be constantly reminded of his promise.

Blenkins relapsed once more into his usual state of self-effacement, and looked discontentedly after the major as he went off, full of his discovery and the thought of the telegram which by now must have left Dornenburg.

"It isn't easy to eat off the same plate as these big people," muttered Blenkins, half to himself. "They know how to jabber and brag, and make dashes at the enemy, but to make war as it ought to be done—of that they have no idea." He grinned maliciously as he saw Muller's cart out on the plain. "Oh, ho ! old boy, so it didn't suit you to take any notice of me? Well, if I know anything of a greedy, chattering Kaffir, then . . . he, he, he ! What was it we learnt at school? Di—, 'divide et impera'; that is what I call making war."

The troops dispersed and marched away, while the guns were driven past as many farms as possible, for it was necessary that the district should be duly impressed. Blenkins followed the soldiers, taking care not to be too far behind, for he knew the inhabitants and feared that they might unmask him.

The major was by no means mistaken in his calculation that the confiscation of the guns would cause a sensation. Although not a soul was to be seen, he knew that the lumbering convoy was being watched everywhere with wondering and apprehensive looks.

The many women and the few men in the isolated farms asked themselves what it could mean. And when they learnt that the guns were those of their own countrymen, tears sprang to their eyes and deep sighs came from their oppressed breasts. This, then, was another great grief to add to those that had gone before, and backs that had been straightened by brighter hopes were bowed down once again by this fresh burden, for was not all now utterly lost?

The very next morning, however, a report spread from farm to farm that treachery had been at work. Some Boer had sold his country for gold, or else to save his farm, no one rightly knew which, nor did anyone know whence the stealthy rumour came. Yet it was to be heard everywhere; it floated about the air, making all minds doubly ill at ease. Now that it was found to be almost impossible to hold the ground against the enemy, how would things go if there were also traitors amongst themselves? Their grievous

misfortunes were already too heavy to be borne, and yet fresh burdens were constantly being thrust upon their weary shoulders. Now there was this new rumour. Where did it come from? It came on the wings of the wind. The traitor should be punished, severely—unmercifully. No punishment could be too hard for his crime, and all well knew that none but a Boer could have betrayed this carefully guarded secret. The culprit must therefore be sought among their own good friends and faithful neighbours.

The three sons of Erasmus Flick spent a whole day in riding from farm to farm, in order to summon the men to meet at a certain spot where they would be safe from the vigilance of the police troops. They galloped along the roads, knocked at the closed doors, and when they were admitted they told their errand.

“Who summons us?” asked the men gloomily.

“Father and Oom Zimmer.”

“And Piet Muller, who is also one of the elders,—what does he say?”

“You will hear of him soon enough, Oom.”

The men nodded, saying that they would come on the day appointed.

The lads rode on, each taking a different route, for the district was large and the farms lay far apart. In his hasty ride David Flick rode up to Piet Muller’s farm, and the old man stood at the door and waited. He knew his own people, and he knew that there was something in the wind.

“Won’t you stop a bit?” he asked, for David made no sign of doing so.

“No,” answered the lad shortly.

Astonished at his unfriendly tone, the old man looked up at him and asked anxiously—

“What’s the matter, David?”

“I don’t believe it, Oom; but everybody says that you did it.”

“Did it? Did what, David?”

The lad pulled himself up in his saddle.

“I mustn’t say.”

"You can tell me—Piet Muller!"

"Well then, if you promise not to tell anyone who told you, Oom. All the men"—here he drew himself up again and looked round about with flashing eyes—"are to meet on Thursday night at"—and he leaned forward and whispered the name of the spot.

"What's wrong, David?"

"That you will get to know soon enough, Oom." And he spurred his horse and rode away quickly, for it was a good distance to the next farm.

Piet Muller put his hand to his forehead and staggered into the house. He could not understand, but it must be something dreadful when his own godson could look at him like that. For two whole days he sat bending over his Bible, reading page after page. On the third day he saddled his horse, made his daughter-in-law help him into the saddle, and rode away from his farm deep in thought. His journey took him half a day, for he was old and unaccustomed to ride, but he was determined to hear and see what it was that could have led a young lad to treat in such a manner a man so generally respected as he.

Shortly after dusk he reached his goal. After tethering his horse, he approached a dark group of men whom he saw gathered beside a small heap of stones in the middle of the plain. A gloom seemed to rest over them, and from among the little crowd there arose one solitary voice. Leaning upon his crutch there was old Zimmer, speaking in a loud voice of "unser Kaiser," who knew a way out of everything. "But he is dead"—here his thundering voice sank to a whisper that was half tragic and half comic, and his big, plump face assumed an expression of concern—"Moltke is dead, Bismarck is dead also; and they were men—ah, my friends, ah!" He shook his head, and heaved a sigh which was not unlike the bellow of an ox. "Those who could or would have done something for us are gone—gone—gone!" He rubbed his bloodshot eyes and sighed again.

The others were silent. What did it matter to them how many were dead and gone? For a long time past

they had ceased to count ; now they scarcely counted on the living. Up to the last they had hoped much of Europe, which had proclaimed to the world the coming blessings of the Peace Conference with such a flourish of trumpets. And they still waited, for they had not understood that it had all been a diplomatic farce, which, instead of securing peace, had merely proclaimed war and drawn up certain rules for its conduct. But now their only hope was in death ; now they were beginning to see that they had been befooled in this as in everything, and their minds were rank with bitterness.

Piet Muller approached the group slowly, and as he did so the silence became still more profound. They made way for him freely, and the hand that he stretched forth to them in greeting they pretended not to see.

“ What is this, friends, what is this ? ” stammered the old man, greatly perturbed.

For a time no one answered, so full of bitterness were their minds. At length old Zimmer lost patience. Stamping his crutch on the ground, he exclaimed shrilly—

“ My farm is not burnt down yet, but I hope it soon will be ! ”

Piet Muller was quite at a loss. He looked inquiringly from one to the other, but met only with cold, angry glances. The old man’s head began to swim ; he felt his legs giving way beneath him, and tottered forwards towards Zimmer as if to support himself. But the German moved aside, muttering something about “ duty to his new fatherland.” Still Muller understood nothing ; the silence of his friends troubled him. He trembled like a reed before the wind, and gazed at them with his innocent, childlike eyes.

“ What is this, friends ; what is all this ? ” he asked again.

The same dark silence and the same angry shrugging of the shoulders were his only answer. Adversity had made hard men of them ; they received little mercy from their enemies, and they meant to show none to those whom they had reason to consider their enemies.

Muller repeated his question, this time a little querulously.

"Begin, Simeon!" said Erasmus Flick, in order to put an end to this painful scene, and the eldest of the sons who lived in his house mounted the heap of stones.

All bowed their heads. Simeon Flick was a student at the divinity college, and all knew what was to follow.

With a Bible in one hand, the lad towered above the heads of the grown men and looked down upon them. He was the youngest in the group, but the fact that his future was to be devoted to the ministry caused his slender figure to be regarded with special respect even by those who were much older than himself. Bringing his right hand down upon the book with a thud that made the leaves flutter, he began to speak.

"The Lord has turned away His countenance from us," he said. "His anger rests heavily upon the land, and the troops of the Philistines and the Amalekites rove over all our plains. But as surely as the Lord smites, as surely shall He lift His hand from us, and raise up that which is bowed down." The lad began to wax eloquent in the presence of the elders, and his plain, freckled face began to glow. As he warmed to his work the words flowed from his lips; the hard sayings of the Old Testament, the wailing lamentations of the prophets filled the air; but not a word of mercy or propitiation breathed through this sermon in the wilderness which was hurled into the darkness of the night, arousing a plaintive echo far over the veldt.

For a whole hour the lad spoke of down-trodden, death-doomed Judea, whose history the twentieth century was enacting before the eyes of the world. Everywhere he found points of resemblance and similes; but in the midst of destruction he saw the star of hope break forth. Jael and Sisera were summoned from their many thousand years' oblivion; Judith swept past bearing Holofernes' bleeding head; the stones from the sling of David the shepherd flew whistling to their goal; and from the den of lions Daniel prophesied of the new kingdom.

All hearts beat faster; the eyes of the old men glistened, and the breath of the youths came and went quickly.

"Yes, yes," they muttered, "all this has happened once before; it may happen once again."

But the speaker dwelt chiefly upon Judas Maccabæus, upon Judas with his crushing hammer. The simple faith of the Free Staters was fired at his words; the men became exalted, repeating at random sentences and disconnected passages from their prayers. For there—there in the book that the lad held out to them—they could all plainly read their own history. The young student worked himself up to a frenzy; he interwove his presages of victory with prophecies of death; he dragged his audience along with him from resignation to enthusiasm, making them forget alike their troubles and their impotence. Stern, cold reality was completely swept away; all believed, for all had once more began to hope.

When he had finished his sermon all pressed round the speaker to press his hand. All felt that the Assyrian and the Babylonian had not yet trampled Judea under foot, that the Free State might yet arise, that that might yet be raised up which had been bowed down.

"Das war schön!" snuffled old Zimmer, with the tears running down his cheeks. "To battle, friends! To victory! Vorwärts, immer vorwärts!"

"Wait!" said the student. "The last and most important matter remains. We have come here to judge the traitor who is in our midst."

There was a deep silence. The men bowed their heads, and Simeon Flick spoke on, exerting himself to instil a tone of solemnity into his thin, boyish voice.

"Only the elders of the community knew where the eight guns were buried. They are now in the hands of the enemy. There is treachery among us!" he shouted, bringing his fist down upon the Bible.

"Treachery!" muttered the men.

"Such a blow as this may affect the whole war. It must be punished so that it shall never occur again."

"It must be punished!" said the men, with one voice.

"I therefore request each of you, in virtue of that office to which I am shortly to be consecrated, to come and lay

your right hand upon the Lord's Holy Bible, and with earnest purpose to take your oath, vowing a bloody revenge. The ties of blood must avail nothing, neither must affection or friendship. Should a son have knowledge that his father has done this, he must kill him with his own hand, and so expiate in the guilty blood the shame of being kinsman to a traitor. If a son has done it, then the father shall take his life, and the criminal may thank the Almighty that we do not make the punishment harder. If your brother has done it, he must be stricken down, and may his memory be cursed to all eternity ! So let it be, Amen ! For next to God in heaven comes our earthly fatherland. See, here is the Bible. Come forward, each of you, and take your oath ! ”

Carried away by the vehemence of the young man's manner, and moved to their innermost being by his exhortation, which had appealed only to their human passions, all approached him in order to obey. Piet Muller came forward first, tottering, but Simeon Flick, thrusting aside his outstretched hand, said—

“ I don't know anything, but you must not. Perhaps you might perjure yourself.”

Then at last the old man understood, and fell to the ground with a groan. The other men, however, did not appear to notice ; they were hardened by their hatred, and went out of their way so as not to touch him.

“ Father, Reuben, David ! ” shouted the student, after he had himself taken the oath.

His father and brothers came forward and swore with their two fingers laid on the Bible, and after them followed all the others.

When his turn came, Abraham Van der Nath stepped forward and solemnly swore the same oath as the others. He had certainly vowed that he would no longer shed human blood ; but here something much more serious was in question, and his abhorrence was so strong that he made a larger detour than any round Piet Muller, who lay, apparently lifeless, with his face to the ground.

"My fatherland!" he exclaimed in a state of exaltation, "receive my promise, and may my son's name be cursed if I break it!" At these words he felt a glow all over him, and he looked round joyously at the others, who received his outburst with murmurs of approval.

"And de Vlies?" asked some one, when the last man had sworn.

"We have thought of him," answered Erasmus Flick, who stood enjoying his son's triumph. "My boys are going to-morrow night."

"Why not to-night? He may want the news about—about the guns at once."

"To-morrow night it is sure to be moonlight, and then it will be easier to keep clear of the rooneks' patrols."

The men nodded in concurrence, and shook each other by the hand before departing. But no one took any notice of Piet Muller, and when they separated the student said once more—

"Let us remember!"

"We shall not forget."

Van der Nath's voice rang the clearest as he spoke, and his hand was clenched the firmest.

But old Muller remained behind with his face to the ground. His horse stood waiting, whining impatiently as the others departed. Then the animal turned his head and went over to the lonely man, pulling his tether-peg out of the ground as he went. He sniffed round about the old man, gently pushing his nose against his shoulder, and when he had repeated this manœuvre several times, his master at length awoke from his swoon and gazed about him in astonishment.

"They think I—that I did it!" he said, groping absent-mindedly about him. He found the Bible, which the student had placed by his head. Then he remembered all, and began to sob like a child.

The horse neighed and again rubbed his nose against him.

Piet Muller got up, climbed laboriously into the saddle, and rode homewards. Early in the morning he reached his

farm. Taking the Bible with him, he entered, and, placing a ladder to the trap-door of the cock-loft, he clambered up to the loft. For some time he searched among the harness until he found a long, supple leather strap. Then he smiled strangely, although the tears still ran down his sunken cheeks.

During the morning his son's wife had occasion to go up to the loft, and there she found her father-in-law stiff and cold with a noose about his neck, an open Bible set up before him, its pages still wet. But Piet Muller had been dead for some time.

Some hours later a Kaffir came to the English camp, and told with sobs that his Baas had hanged himself. The soldiers told him to go away. They had something else to think about, they said, than the foolishness of an old Boer, and in war there was somebody who died every day. But Blenkins, who was always hanging sniffling about, listened with affected concern to the Kaffir's incoherent story, and went off at once to the chief of the police troops, and smilingly told him that he brought him good news.

"Hanged himself, you say, fellow? Good heavens! what can it mean?" asked the major, who was really concerned at what he heard.

"It means that one must never do a good act in time of war," said Blenkins humbly; "it may be misunderstood."

"You mean then . . . ?"

"Yes, that was reason enough."

"Oh, how terrible!"

"Yes, that's the way of war, major. And now, another thing. These nights you will do well to send out a strong patrol. There is something wicked in the wind. And lastly, major, when do you expect the Scots?"

At this moment he looked so like a hyena that the major, exasperated, turned his back upon him. But as an officer he knew that to keep one's word was a military virtue, and he had no thought of departing from his promise.

"To-morrow evening!" he snarled.

Blenkins chuckled and went off. As he came out two

Kaffirs were hanging about the door. As Blenkins appeared they exchanged looks, and to his astonishment he recognised in one of them old Muller's driver.

"Father and son," thought he to himself, and wondered what they were doing there. But as there were always Kaffirs about the camp he thought no more about it.

"Stay here, Goliath," said the elder of the two, "and if he goes outside the camp, then . . . you know where I am to be found."

The Kaffir lad grinned. They exchanged a knowing look and then separated.

Late in the afternoon a strong patrol was sent out in the direction Blenkins had indicated. The major knew his skill in scenting out information and his ability in pumping the Kaffirs, and he was disposed to depend on him, at least so long as Blenkins had anything to hope from him.

The forty men detailed to patrol three miles of the district were under the command of a lieutenant. This officer was far from delighted with his task, which was intolerably tedious, and offered no chance of distinguishing oneself. It was designed to lead to nothing but criticisms and censures from his superiors, who in their turn could only look for rewards of a like nature for exertions which seldom yielded the hoped-for result. The men, too, were of a similar opinion; a wretched hospital was the only certainty for them in the future, and in the meanwhile they had nothing but fatiguing night-work, and, to keep their spirits up, their daily rations.

The lieutenant, however, meant to do his duty. He formed his men into a line that was supposed to extend from a certain cactus-grove—where he himself settled down with eight men to wait, and to curse over their hard lot—to a kopje three miles off, to which he sent a corporal with five men. The remainder were ranged in twos and twos along a slit, which wound in and out between the grove and the kopje. The men had strict orders not to smoke or talk after nightfall, and they crouched down grumbling at their posts, with no protection from the night except their capes. The order to keep their eyes and ears open did

not trouble them much ; they had heard it so often before, and had so often obeyed it to no purpose. They were sick of the whole thing, and looked upon the wearisome night-watch as little else than a cunning device to torment them.

Twilight came, and soon darkness enveloped the whole plain. If anything was going to happen it ought to be soon, for there would probably be moonlight later on, and then there would be nothing for them to amuse themselves with except to sleep and catch a bad cold.

About the middle of the line lay two men yawning. They had begun by killing time in sneering at their officers, who never seemed to know what they wanted to do. They ended the discussion with a stifled dispute as to which of them should sleep first, for they did not mean to wear themselves to death in this stupid war. When they had argued long enough to tire themselves even of that, they decided to settle the matter by drawing straws. The one who should draw the shortest should keep awake until the moon rose, when the other would take his turn. The winner crept down well pleased into a sheltered nook, leaving his comrade to look after himself as best he could. The latter, grumbling at his bad luck, placed his Lee-Metford rifle in front of him, and stretched himself out at full length in order to fight against his drowsiness ; but his yawns soon became as long-drawn as they were frequent, and at each one he looked over towards his companion, feeling an almost irresistible desire to follow his example. He lay thus for about half an hour, swearing and yawning alternately, and at length fell for a few minutes into that condition of semi-slumber which is more exhausting than anything else. Then he shook his head and changed his position. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and pricked up his ears, for he fancied he heard a sound out on the plain. He listened, and when he had assured himself that he was not mistaken, he aroused his comrade with a kick.

“Shut up !” snarled the latter. “The moon is not”—

“Sh— !”

“What? . . . Do you hear anything ?”

“Three horses. They are coming this way.”

"The devil take them ! Yes, I hear them too."

They crept close together and cocked their rifles. For five minutes they lay motionless, trying to peer through the darkness. The tramp of horses' hoofs had ceased for a time, but presently they were surprised to hear it again, this time close beside them.

"Halt ! Who goes there ?"

The soldiers had both got on their knees, with their rifles ready to fire. They waited uneasily for an answer, but only a muffled whisper reached their ears.

"Who goes there ?" shouted one of the men sharply, raising his weapon.

"Shoot, Reuben !" said a shrill boyish voice from out the darkness.

A reddish-yellow light flashed a few paces off, dazzling the two soldiers, who staggered back for a moment, although next moment they discharged their rifles.

Two more shots followed—from where they could not tell—and then the whole plain seemed to become alive. Shots crackled to right and left ; for about a minute they lasted without intermission, as the sentries awoke from their sleep and discharged their rifles at random. Then all once more became quiet, for after the first excitement was over the soldiers realised how dangerous this aimless firing might prove.

All listened in order to try to understand what had happened, but nothing was to be heard. The firing now broke out from the cactus-grove, and the soldiers followed the example by firing in return. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the hubbub ceased.

A shriek sounded far out on the plain. Wild and shrill it pierced the air, and then all was still again. It put new life into the soldiers, who had now had time to recover their senses. Plainly, some one had really been attempting to sneak through their line ; so they took aim, and sent more shots over in the direction from which the cry had come.

There was another shriek, followed by the tramp of horses' hoofs, while the thud of something falling to the ground was heard distinctly. Then as if to throw light

upon the confusion, the moon broke through some clouds that were slowly drifting northwards, and shed its rays over the veldt.

Two shadows could be seen moving rapidly about some object which lay on the ground.

The soldiers had taken in the situation. Their rifles rang out anew, and next day the corporal over at the kopje declared that he had heard a broken boyish voice call out, "My love to father, Simeon!"

More shots followed, and the forms out on the plain seemed to blend into one; then they tottered from side to side in a fashion which to the onlooker was comical. At length they disappeared. At the same moment the moon vanished behind a thick cloud, and the firing was discontinued.

Along the whole line attention was strained to the uttermost, but not a sound betokened the presence of a single living soul. For ten minutes this state of tension lasted, and then the men crept down to their places of shelter, half of them having seen nothing whatever, and feeling rather foolish at having wasted so much ammunition without knowing why.

Beneath the cactus bushes lay the lieutenant, tugging angrily, for want of something better to do, at the short grass stubble. His men's aimless shooting into the dark had put him out of temper, and he promised himself that he would give the alarmist a good rating. This was a funny sort of a war, he thought. Plenty of night-watch work, and not the slightest chance of commendation. Had not something similar happened the week before with another company? About a dozen pounds of lead had been strewn out over the plain, and with what result? A toothless old Kaffir woman had been shot down while out gathering a little firewood. Such things did not get into the papers; it was not for such things that one got the good service medal. To the devil with such a war!

Again the moon pierced the clouds and lighted up the plain.

The lieutenant gazed curiously over the great expanse. Hullo! could that dark object over there be a dead man,

or . . . ? Well, he would soon enough get to know. And muttering an oath between his teeth, he crouched down and made himself as comfortable as possible upon the hard ground.

The moon shone down upon the men as they concealed themselves in the shadow, upon the plain with all that there was upon it, casting its magical glimmer over everything. Over by the kopje a little spot still lay in darkness, hidden by a cloud. Then the cloud glided slowly—almost unconcernedly—away, and the whole region lay bathed in the pale, melancholy moonlight. As the moon's rays fell they encountered a dead horse, and beside it a human form which lay face downwards and motionless. They encountered something that shone—a rifle, and as the bank of clouds separated the light moved on. A little farther off it fell upon another form lying on its side, its face turned upwards and deathly pale.

Apparently the moon had no wish to see more of the deeds of men. She drew a veil over her face, and the objects were again enshrouded in darkness. But an impatient gust of wind burst forth and once more dispersed the intercepting cloud-mass, and again the moon appeared and looked down.

A third human form lay stretched upon the ground, its white face turned up to heaven. The moon cast her light caressingly upon it, dispelling the shadows and the darkness, and lingering as if with wonder upon the sight. She recognised the angular features of the young divinity student, with the calm of death upon them. And yet she did not recognise them—had the lad *three* eyes . . . or what was this? Of course he had but two, and they were closed for ever; the third, which was in the middle of the forehead, wide open and staring upwards, was the spot by which death had entered and life had been driven out.

Once more the moon withdrew behind the fleeting clouds. She had seen Erasmus Flick's three dead sons.

CHAPTER II

ONE OF THOSE IN AUTHORITY

“**N**O! you cursed, self-sufficient Boers, those days are past when you used to bind a man between a couple of horses and drag him out of the district, for wringing the neck of some wretched hen or pilfering a few rotten eggs! Now there will be an end to your cursed arrogance, for now there are other masters in the country, and you'll all have to go a-begging. Your Bible-reading and psalm-singing won't help you a bit in this business; you've been beaten; and you'll just have to put up with it. Yes, the good old days are past, and here stands one of the men who mean to boss you!” Blenkins slapped his chest proudly and grinned at the other. “I can go to the general,” he went on, “and tell him who you are. Field-cornet, ha, ha, ha! Pack of nonsense!—No, no; now you can hold your tongue, and thank God you are allowed to listen.”

He had entered without any salutation, and stood in the middle of the room with his hat on his head. His small, wicked eyes shone with malice, and his whole figure shook with nervous insolence, produced by his consciousness of the power that had been given to him.

Van der Nath had risen from his seat at the table as soon as he had seen the fellow come blustering in, and had stretched out his hand, ready to greet him as a friend. But now he slowly dropped his arm, for a terrible suspicion came over him. He was not the man, however, to bow before the first onset of the storm, be it ever so violent. So he pointed to the door, and said shortly—

"Out! . . . Begone!"

"Yes, when I have said what I have to say. You remember, perhaps, when I stood at your door and humbly asked for a little food to stay my hunger—you remember? You gave me food as one flings a bone to a dog, and you shut the door and let me sit outside on the stones, chewing your tough biltong and maize-cakes as hard as stones. You did not give me so much as a drop of milk; ditch-water, you thought, was good enough for a tramp. I haven't forgotten, either, how you all laughed at my rags, and set your dog at me—no, not I!"

"I know nothing of this."

"I can't help what you didn't know. You or your Kaffir boys—it's all the same to me. I was tired and hungry and asked for food, and you answered: 'He who will not work does not deserve to eat.' 'Well, give me some work, then,' I said. 'What can an Englishman do?' you asked. 'I can teach your son my noble mother-tongue,' I answered; 'in me you have a man who knows nearly everything; I have been a schoolmaster.' Then you told me that I ought to have remained one. You set me to work among the Kaffirs, among the dirty, greasy offspring of Cain. You set a freeborn citizen to watch your scabby sheep. And because I took a wretched old hen, and a drop of whisky out of your cupboard there, I was tied between two horses, and was dragged eleven miles before you let me go with a kick. And you left me with the threat that I should be shot like a dog if I ever came back again."

"You stole money as well"—

"Can you prove it, Abraham Van der Nath?" Blenkins looked hastily round to see if any strangers were about. When he had assured himself that they were alone, he whistled triumphantly, snapped his fingers, and continued: "Not you; no one saw me take any, and that's just the point. My country's laws—yours are not worth a rap!—forbid any man to come forward with a charge that he cannot prove. If he does, he himself is punished for false accusation. So now, you see how the land lies." He bent

across the table and whispered softly : " Well, between ourselves, it *was* I who borrowed your coppers. You see, I am one of those who are to be masters here ; for what should a stupid psalm-singing peasant have to say to anything ? I had a right to take them, for your Bible, just like mine, says that he who has shall share with him who has not. Did you do that ? No, not so much as a drop of whisky did you ever let me taste, although I told you that my health required spirits. You drivelled about drunkenness—that's what you did ; but you sat and gulped down the whisky yourself in the evenings — you stingy wretch ! So I took what I could find, for I can't live without spirits ; it's my weakness, but at the same time my strength. Yes, I took it ; and I saw a bundle of notes beside it. How can anybody be such a fool as to put money in an unlocked cupboard ? Was it my fault ? You had put them there to tempt me ; I am sure you had done it on purpose. You did not like me, you old humbug, because I did not fling texts about me, and go about with my eyes turned up to heaven. You did not suspect the Kaffirs who were always running in and out ; you fixed at once upon the stranger, and you and your neighbours sat in judgment upon me, and kicked Sisyphus Blenkins out of the place."

Blenkins had carefully prepared his speech, and for a whole week he had gloated over the phrases with which he should crush the other. Every honest man was his enemy, and it had long been with him a fixed idea to revenge himself on some one, no matter whom. He had intoxicated himself with the thought, and now he was exceedingly proud of himself for standing where he was, daring to say what he liked.

Van der Nath regarded the enraged man with a certain contemptuous interest. He had seen Blenkins approach, followed by half a dozen soldiers who were waiting outside the house. He supposed that he was now one of the police spies who, in return for good pay, did the dirty work with which the officers did not care to soil their hands. He asked himself what would happen if he were to kick

the fellow down the steps, but his peaceable disposition caused him to restrain himself and decide to wait a little.

"Yes, my boy," continued Blenkins, seating himself comfortably in a chair, "now I am one of the bosses; now it is my turn to kick. Yes, you may look out of the window. There stands six men with loaded rifles, and if I only whistle they will come in and guard you while I search the house. We are out on a little expedition, you see. We are looking for Mausers, for the Government, in whose paternal hands you now are, think it quite unnecessary for you to have such things. They find that your sight is not over good; you so easily mistake a khaki tunic for a roving wolf. We are afraid you might come to harm—we are so very anxious for your welfare; and so you are to be completely disarmed—yes, completely."

It was as much as Van der Nath could do to master his rage. He saw, however, that he must be on his guard, for he believed that the other was trying for some purpose to make him forget himself.

"Yes, my good Abraham," Blenkins went on, "that is the way in war. But it wasn't of this that I wanted to speak. You must know that I have another errand. You fancy, perhaps, that I am sitting here talking to amuse you? You mistake—you make a great mistake. I don't care a jot what you think or fancy. I am here to amuse myself, and—to be revenged!" He brought his fist down upon the table, and went on speaking in a voice so full of triumph and malice that Van der Nath became even more suspicious, and was therefore more than ever on his guard. "To be revenged, I said—did you hear, Abraham Van der Nath? I have waited long, but now you shall pay for kicking me and calling me a thief before both whites and blacks. No; one does not call a free man thief without proof—incontestable proof—which you had not."

Van der Nath looked him straight in the face, and said with a look of supreme contempt—

"Thief!"

Blenkins sprang from his seat and shouted furiously—

"Say that again! Say it again if you dare!"

"Call in your six men, and I will repeat it before them not once, but ten times."

With a leap Blenkins was at the door, fumbling at the lock. He was deadly pale; only the tip of his nose was a bright red, and bore witness to his weakness—and his strength. Blind with rage, he could not at once find the fastening, and this insignificant circumstance gave him time to quieten down a little.

"No," he said, half to himself, "we don't need witnesses. I would rather speak to you without listeners, Abraham —ha, ha! You aren't such a fool after all, but you shan't befool me."

The change that had come over him was so complete that Van der Nath involuntarily asked himself if the man who now returned slowly and almost cringingly to his place at the table could be the same person who had been in such a fury only a moment before.

Blenkins paused for a few moments in order to gather fresh strength from a bottle which he produced from his coat-tail pocket.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips, "now we have reached the point I wanted to come to. How, do you think, ought a single man to revenge himself upon a fellow who is stronger than three ordinary men? A difficult problem, isn't it? You could never have solved it, but I— See here, Abraham Van der Nath," he said, touching his forehead, "here are my tools, and even my worst enemies will admit that they are not easily matched. Well, I took my time, thought it well over, and found—he, he, he! The war came, and my time came with it. When you left home, I came here in your place. Your son"—

"Isaac!" interrupted Van der Nath. "What about him?"

Blenkins half closed his eyes, and blinked at his enemy. He saw that he had touched the weak point at last, and his ugly face literally beamed with unholy joy.

"He is the stupidest lad I have ever seen, and in my time I have seen a good many," he said blandly. "Apparently he resembles his father in that respect; wait a

moment longer, Abraham Van der Nath, and you shall learn. The buried guns"—

"The guns?" gasped Van der Nath.

"Precisely, the guns. How do you think I got to know where they were hidden?"

"It was you, then?"

"Yes, I—and Isaac."

"It's a lie!"

"Wait a bit, old chap!—wait, I say! Don't imagine it was such an easy business to wriggle the secret out of the boy. But I flattered his vanity; I turned up the whites of my eyes, and read aloud from the Bible by the hour—yes, that Bible over there. And, to clinch matters, I laid my hand on the old book, and swore I was his friend. And so I was—until he blabbed; then I had no more use of him,—what's that you are chattering about per—, perjury? Nonsense! In war all means are fair, and when it comes to inflicting a blow upon the enemies of one's beloved country, people a thousand times better than you or I would not hesitate a moment about doing the same."

Blenkins closed his eyes for a moment; his triumph was too great to be enjoyed in any other way. The man before him was completely crushed; his bent form, his pale face, and the drops of perspiration on his forehead sufficed to show it. Then Blenkins opened his eyes again, smacked his lips, and said—

"That is what I call taking revenge. You may be sure, Abraham, that the whole district will not be long in learning what a nice sort of people you and your son are. And I shall not forget to let everybody know the exact price that is paid for such information. I will look up old Flick—he is in a pretty bad humour just now; I will whisper the amount in the ears of old Zimmer and old Van Delft. And"—here he rose up and shouted aloud—"they will believe me, as they once believed you!"

For a moment all was dark before Van der Nath's eyes, and the floor seemed to rock beneath him. Stunned, he sank down upon the couch, but next moment he was

up again, and with redoubled strength, and an expression of determination about his lips, he strode towards Blenkins.

The fellow crouched down in a heap, trembling from head to foot, for he read murder in Van der Nath's eyes, and his strength forsook him utterly. He saw the Boer raise his clenched fist, and he shut his eyes expecting to receive a deathblow. Surprised that it did not descend, he ventured to open his eyes again. Van der Nath had approached the wall, from which, with grim satisfaction, he took down a big sjambok made of hippopotamus hide. At the sight Blenkins's knees gave way, his brain ceased to obey his will, and with a feeble groan he sank to the floor, and there he lay.

Van der Nath drew the long lash almost caressingly through his left hand. He then bent over his victim, and quietly and methodically stripped off his coat, ripped up his waistcoat, and bared his back. Although Blenkins was conscious of every detail, his brain was almost paralysed, and he was unable to make the slightest resistance or utter a cry for help. Once more Van der Nath drew the lash experimentally between his fingers. Then he raised his arm.

The first lash came whistling down upon the man's naked back, leaving a long red stripe from shoulder to shoulder.

A convulsive shudder shook Blenkins's form from head to foot. His eyes were closed, his lips pale; his forehead rested on the floor.

Van der Nath stared vacantly into space. He seemed no longer to be able to think clearly. He neither saw nor heard; time and space no longer existed. As the arm that wielded the whip rose and fell, he seemed to act like some machine driven by an external force.

"Ten," he said absently, pausing as if to collect his thoughts. It was useless, and he stepped aside a couple of paces so that he now stood at Blenkins's head. Again he raised his arm, and again the lash swished through the air, this time falling from the shoulder to the waist, so that the wounds made by the preceding blows were torn

asunder. The blood splashed, and shreds of skin were torn off. Still he went on as deliberately as before.

"Twenty," he said, looking up. He had an unpleasant sensation that someone was looking on, and glanced round in order to discover what the disturbing element could be.

A pair of eyes, distended wide with terror, met his, and a boyish face, in which fear struggled with horror, appeared close beside him.

"Good heavens, father, what are you doing?" exclaimed a trembling voice.

A glimmer of understanding at length appeared in Van der Nath's expressionless eyes. He clutched at his forehead in bewilderment and looked down. There lay a man whose whole body throbbed convulsively, from whose wounded back flowed the red, thick blood; and beside him stood his only son, trembling with horror at the sight.

"I am punishing," said Van der Nath coldly. He laid the whip aside, and with his foot turned over Blenkins's seemingly lifeless body. "I have whipped a dirty dog," he continued in a deep voice, "but the worse is yet to come."

He had called to mind the oath that he had sworn upon the Bible, and the information that had just been given him, and his brain began to work once more.

"Is he dead?" whispered Isaac faintly.

"No," answered his father almost impatiently. "Twenty lashes," he added drily, "doesn't kill a grown man; but he'll remember it all his life." He started suddenly. With dazzling clearness thought had flashed through the darkness of his mind. Could there really be any way of deliverance? Was it possible for him to escape from keeping his oath?

"Those men out there, what do you think they will do when they see him?" asked the boy slowly.

"I suppose they will avenge him." Van der Nath hung eagerly upon this faint hope. "I think they will shoot me for my pains," he went on with strange eagerness; "at least they ought to." At the thought he became more and more animated. It was one way out; what he had

done so absent-mindedly might free him from the consequences of the dreadful oath he had sworn. With a laugh so callous that he himself shuddered at it, he exclaimed: "It was not I who did this! It was some other will than mine—whose I know not—that guided my hand."

"What have you done?" stammered the boy, frightened out of his wits; "what have you done?" It was all incomprehensible to him. All he knew was that his father had exposed himself to a terrible danger.

"It is one way out of it," said Van der Nath half to himself. "If I thrash the fellow to death, then they will shoot me. Then the others will never get to know, and at least no one will be able to say that I shrank from my duty." He nodded his head, and once more seized the sjambok to continue the punishment.

"Father, father! For Heaven's sake!" In desperation the boy hung upon his arm to restrain him.

"Get out of the way, Isaac!"

"You don't know what you are doing, father!"

"And you—do you know what you are doing, my son?"

"If you kill him you will be shot!"

"Nothing better can happen for me—and you!"

The boy's eyes grew round with astonishment. Was this his father, whose gentleness he had so often heard praised? He saw that something must have happened, but what? He had no time to speculate. Something more important had to be done. He could ask questions afterwards. Now it was for him to prevent his father from doing that which must bring about his certain destruction. And that he meant to effect his purpose could be read in his strangely flashing eyes.

"They will kill you, father!" he repeated.

"Isn't that better than . . .?" Van der Nath broke off abruptly, clenching his teeth, and raised the whip.

"Father," said Isaac resolutely, "this man has helped us more than most people."

Van der Nath looked up at the ceiling as if seeking inspiration from above. But there he found nothing.

"Get out of the way, Isaac!" he said harshly.

"No," answered the lad, with equal firmness. "You don't know what you are doing; you must be ill."

"Yes, I am sick unto death. Get out of the way, I say!" And again the whip was raised.

Isaac realised that something must be done at once. Thrusting himself between his father and Blenkins, he said—

"Strike, father! The first lash shall cut me!"

Van der Nath's hand sank down by his side, and his face assumed the expression of perplexity of a wounded animal that sees all escape cut off.

"O Lord, let this cup pass from me!" he prayed from the depths of his anguish-stricken heart. And all at once he burst into a flood of tears, which ran down his cheeks and over his beard. A great struggle was going on within him. He felt himself bound, crushed, helpless; nothing now could save his son, for the oath must be kept, so he bowed before the Almighty, who searches man's heart. And yet, though the cold, relentless face of necessity grinned at him, he still hoped. In his terrible anguish he prayed: "O Lord, hear Thy servant in his distress; have compassion on the worm that writhes in the dust before Thee!" He sank down on his knees, and stretched his folded hands to heaven. This was the greatest trial of his life, a trial that was beyond his strength, a sacrifice that he was incapable of offering. "O Lord, O Lord," he muttered, wringing his hands, "hear my supplication: strike me with paralysis, take away the sight of my eyes, slay me for my sins, but let me not—let me not do this!" And with caressing tenderness he fixed his burning glance upon his son.

The lad steadied his trembling body against the table.

"Father, father!" he asked, "what is the matter?"

Van der Nath sprang to his feet. Why was he begging help of Heaven when every moment brought life or death in its train? "You must do it!" he said aloud to himself, clinging again to the old hope, "you yourself!" he shouted, seizing a heavy chair and flinging Isaac aside.

"Oh, think what you are doing, father!"

"I am, my boy, I am thinking—only of myself." Again the confused expression came into his eyes. The time for explanation was not yet; he would only rescue his son. So he silently thanked chance or Heaven for having given his enemy's life into his hands.

But Isaac too had made up his mind. He saw only his father's danger, and that there was but one thing to be done. So he gathered his strength together and approached him.

For a moment the two measured each other, their eyes flaming with pent-up excitement. Both had determined to prevail, each in his way.

"He shall die!" said Van der Nath wildly.

"Not if I can prevent it."

"Out of the way, Isaac!"

"Never!"

There was a pause of about half a minute, during which each glared at the other, panting. At length Isaac said imploringly—

"Father, don't compel me to use force."

"Ha, ha, ha! Even this! even this!"

They had seized hold of each other in a first grasp, the father endeavouring to thrust his son aside, Isaac to hold his father back. A deep flush overspread the cheeks of both. The boy, who knew he was no match for his father, cast a glance over his shoulder to see if Blenkins had realised his danger and would make his escape. Presently Van der Nath slipped from his son's grasp, flung him aside, and turned round towards his enemy to throttle him.

But at that moment the door was pushed open, and Blenkins threw himself down the steps head foremost, landing on the ground. He was saved.

Van der Nath staggered to the table and sank down upon a chair.

"It's all over!" he said gloomily, as the door closed of itself behind the fugitive. "You have sealed your own fate, Isaac—and mine also!"

Blenkins had not lost consciousness, although his flesh

had been sadly lacerated by the lash. While the struggle between father and son had been going on he had had time—and the instinct of self-preservation had lent him strength—to crawl towards the door. On reaching it he had raised the latch and flung himself out. He hardly noticed the bruises which he received in his fall ; he did not even trouble himself about the breakage of his precious whisky-flask, some of the fragments of which imbedded themselves in his flesh. He reached the soldiers, and that was all he wanted. Along with his sense of security his native assurance returned. He could not imagine how he could have lain still to receive his thrashing—he could not understand it at all. But he still felt the smart of the lash, and he was filled with a wild desire to be revenged there and then. With some difficulty he pulled himself up.

“Fire, you rascals !” he hissed at the soldiers. “Fire ! do you hear ?”

One man raised his rifle, but very slowly ; the others stood motionless.

“Stop that, M‘Ginnis !” said the corporal sharply. “It can’t be to any of us that he is addressing himself in that tone.”

“Fire !” shouted Blenkins furiously.

“What is it you are screeching about, my dear sir ?” asked the corporal.

“Shoot that rebel in there ! He is the chief—one of the worst of them all ! He”—

“You seem a little excited,” interrupted the corporal quietly. “You don’t appear to be very well. Possibly your health has suffered from the highly original manner in which you descended the steps.”

Blenkins was in a fury. He did not stop to consider the cause of the soldiers’ hostile attitude. Going close up to the corporal, he roared angrily—

“Don’t you intend to obey ?”

The corporal turned his back upon him, and said to one of the soldiers—

“Craggs, did you ever hear anybody speak to Corporal

M'Dunn like that before? What do you think should be done with a fellow who takes such liberties?"

Craggs sniggered, and his comrades joined in, for all were tickled with the scene.

Blenkins laid his hand on the corporal's arm.

"Do you dare to defy my orders?" he asked.

With an impatient movement the corporal shook his hand off.

Blenkins began to realise that his troubles were far from being at an end. This opposition caused him to change his tactics.

"Corporal!" he began, in as friendly a tone as he could command.

M'Dunn turned round to him with an air of astonishment, as if he had only just noticed Blenkins's presence for the first time.

"My dear sir," he said, with exaggerated politeness, "your clothes are sadly in disorder. It may be your habit to go about in such a state—that I don't know. But one thing I do know—that people who are allowed to go about with Her Majesty's Highlanders must observe some sort of propriety in their garb. When you have arranged your attire, then you may begin to talk." And the corporal stroked his fair moustache, while the men laughed outright.

Blenkins stepped a few paces aside, and spent a whole minute in attempting to get himself into something like order. His efforts, however, were not crowned with much success. This he soon realised, and he gave up the task.

"You refuse, then, to obey me?" he asked again impetuously.

"I refuse nothing. To the devil with you! Have I expressed myself with sufficient clearness?"

"I shall not forget your conduct, corporal!"

"I'm much obliged to you for your promise. You shan't lose anything by my forgetting yours."

Blenkins ground his teeth, and cursed the chance that had given him Highlanders for his expedition. He had known well their reluctance to assist the police, but he had had to make the best of it.

"To judge by your appearance, sir," said the perverse corporal, there must have been some fine goings-on in there. We must be off now, but perhaps it will be just as well if we first of all see how you have been amusing yourself."

M'Dunn shouldered his rifle and went a step towards the house.

Blenkins gave vent to a bitter laugh, and without further consideration tore off his clothes and showed his lacerated back.

"Amusing myself!" he cried. "Do you call this amusing myself?"

The soldiers came nearer, and their former contempt for the fellow was changed, if not into pity, into annoyance that a person under their protection should have had such treatment inflicted upon him. Corporal M'Dunn showed himself quite solicitous to efface all trace of what he, with a cough of embarrassment, called "a little misunderstanding."

"Why didn't you call us?" he asked at length.

"Look—just look how that dog has treated a free English citizen, one of the Queen's most devoted servants!" shouted Blenkins, turning himself round so that all should see.

"You don't look a very pretty sight, certainly," observed M'Ginnis.

"Why didn't you offer resistance, man?" asked Craggs.

"He took me by surprise," said Blenkins apologetically.

"Is he armed?" asked the corporal abruptly.

A malicious gleam came into Blenkins's eyes, and he replied—

"He has no weapon but a sjambok, but look out for that!"

He hated Van der Nath, but the corporal too had scoffed at him, and like a flash the thought went through his brain that it would not greatly matter if one of them shot the other. If M'Dunn were killed or wounded he would be pleased; he would still have five men at his disposal, and if their leader were no longer there they would probably be more amenable to his wishes. On the

other hand, Van der Nath would certainly be killed if he used violence.

M'Dunn saw the expression in the fellow's eyes, and understood it. He measured him from head to foot with a defiant look, and ascended the steps, saying over his shoulder: "Stay where you are, lads; I shall manage this business alone."

He opened the door and went in. A couple of minutes later he reappeared and in a serious tone gave the order, "Right about! March!" And without looking back he strode quickly out into the road.

The soldiers followed. They could make nothing of it, but the corporal's earnest expression could not but make an impression on them. Quite at a loss, Blenkins stood for a moment staring after them. Then he hobbled off in their train.

"Corporal M'Dunn!" he shouted. "I shall report your behaviour! I"—

The corporal took longer strides in order to get farther away from him.

"Corporal, you must arrest Field-Cornet Van der Nath!"

"Quick march! Double!" was the only reply. The men at once fell into an even trot, and soon outdistanced Blenkins. He, however, saw the necessity of keeping up with them, so he ran puffing after them a few paces. Then he paused, livid with rage.

"So you refuse to obey?" he shouted once more after the soldiers, who all took longer strides than the regulations strictly required.

Blenkins never got any answer to his question. Plainly they meant to amuse themselves by vexing him in every possible way. He cast a long look full of hate behind him, and seemed for a moment to be on the point of turning back. But fear prevented him. He again ran after the soldiers, and hung on to them, sulky and silent. He did not see the use of risking his life for the sake of revenge. That he must leave until later; but he vowed that he would soon return—in different company.

Meanwhile the little detachment marched steadily over

the plain. The corporal bit his moustache and looked furiously from time to time at Blenkins, who met the looks in a similar fashion.

"Do you remember, lads, how this stupid affair began?" asked M'Dunn suddenly, for it was impossible for him to keep silent any longer.

"Eh?" exclaimed M'Kenzie, who had no idea what was meant.

"Well, this is how it came about," continued M'Dunn, looking angrily at Blenkins. "Early this morning Captain M'Pherson sent for me. He had some work for me and a few others, he said, and it was easy to see that he was not too pleased about it. 'Here are the orders from headquarters,' said the captain, showing me the papers; 'the police brigade is not sufficiently strong. You have got to help them.' Then the captain sighed. 'We were ordered out to fight,' he said, 'but—Heaven help us!—we have scarcely had anything to do but police work. It's hard to ask Scotchmen to do such wretched work, but the order must be obeyed.' 'It isn't pleasant work washing the army's dirty rags,' I said. 'No, it is not,' said he; 'but now it happens that there is some cursed drunken rascal called Jenkins'—didn't he say 'Jenkins,' M'Kenzie?'"

"I think he said Blenkins, but perhaps I am mistaken."

"Ask the gentleman there," said Craggs, who enjoyed the joke hugely, pointing to the person alluded to.

Blenkins quickened his pace in order to get out of earshot.

"Yes, it was certainly Blenkins," said the corporal, with a grim look at the fellow, who was once more trembling with rage. "A wretched coward, it seems—a slinking spy, who creeps about in the dark, but jumps far out of the way as soon as he hears a shot. The fellow had been a schoolmaster down in the Cape, but he was found several times dead drunk at his desk, and he would not leave the little girls alone, and so he was kicked out."

Blenkins had slowed his pace so that he distinctly heard every word, and as it was tolerably near the truth it did not tend to put him in a better humour.

“But he went north,” continued the corporal mercilessly, “and the Boers, the blockheads, let him stop among them. As a rule, they are not very gentle with animals, but this time they made an exception. Now this—was it Blenkins he was called?”

“Yes, Blenkins!” shouted five rough voices, taking evidently a fiendish pleasure in repeating the name.

“Yes, of course, it was Blenkins. Hullo, you there in front! You needn’t run; you may join in the conversation. Oh, you don’t want to? Well, it doesn’t trouble me, as the beggar said when the watch-dog laid hold of his wooden leg. Well, the captain said we were to accompany the fellow. But his last words were: ‘I rely on you, M’Dunn; remember the honour of the regiment!’ ‘Captain,’ I said, ‘you might place it in worse hands than mine.’ But now, I ask all of you, Is it decent that we should follow at the heels of a drunken scoundrel like that and obey his orders?”

“No!” shouted M’Kenzie. “I’ll break every bone in the fellow’s body.”

“No,” said M’Dunn, “let it be. The order was given, but we took care not to make fools of ourselves. For the rest, he has had his deserts without our having moved a finger. Why he got them doesn’t concern us, but that there was good reason I can pretty well swear. You saw that I went into the old Boer’s house, and you saw that I came out again. Upon my word, there can be no doubt that that fellow well deserved his thrashing. What is one to think when one sees a man, with his eyes nearly bursting out of their sockets, and hears him calling out, ‘I did it! Do your duty and shoot me!’ ‘Take your rifle,’ I said, ‘and come out, and we will fire at each other at twenty paces.’ But he only tore his hair and shrieked, ‘Man, for the love of God shoot me—shoot me!’ I admit I felt rather scared, for he kept on calling, ‘Shoot me, shoot me!’ And it isn’t pleasant to listen to that sort of thing, so I came away.”

“Corporal!” said Craggs.

“Hold your tongue when I am speaking! Now, it’s my belief that the Boer and this drunken fellow Blenkins had

something to settle up between them—what, I don't know. A man who behaves like that old Boer, after having had half an hour's conversation with our friend there, can't be right in his head. No, boys ; there's something behind it all that we can't see. Blenkins must have got up some lying story to the police officer, who believed him—there is nobody so stupid as those police fellows. And so six honest Highlanders must trudge for miles, because this nasty drunken creature wants to take some private revenge. No, it's not right ! And then, there's the captain's words about the honour of the regiment. H'mph ! No, boys ; the less we have to do with the business, the better for the regiment."

He looked at Blenkins with a far from friendly glance, and the latter, seeing that everyone was against him, turned round suddenly and said—

"Will you be finished soon ?" Getting no reply, he added : "It will be a nice report that I shall have to give. You shan't forget Sisyphus Blenkins so soon, Corporal M'Dunn !"

The next moment the corporal was beside him.

"I'm not going to mix myself up in your little affairs, so don't you meddle with mine ! But this I can tell you, in confidence—get out of the way, M'Kenzie ! Yes, my good friend Blenkins, or Jenkins, or whatever you call yourself, there are two Highland regiments in the camp, awaiting orders to move—two thousand men, there are. And they could all do with a little amusement—let's say with a police spy, for they are not fond of that breed. It may be a defect of theirs, but they think it rather a merit. Well, you can tell tales about me and get me degraded—such things may happen. But if I'm in a hole for a week or two, that won't help you. All the others will soon ask why. You may be quit of me, of course, but you have still my friend M'Kenzie behind me still left. I know him inside and out ; he's fond of a drop of whisky, I know, but there's nothing he likes so much as a bit of real fighting. He'll give you a regulation thrashing, and keep on at it as long as there's any life left in you. He's confoundedly stubborn

by nature. But if you get him arrested—and he isn't quite unaccustomed to that—then you'll still have four against you. Craggs isn't at all bad with his fists. So I warn you. You can get him and the other three of us the lock-up—they've been there before too—but before they go I fancy they'll have whispered to some comrade something like this: 'It's that cowardly, sneaking police spy called Blenkins who has been telling tales about the boys.' That will soon spread, and next day you will have the whole regiment at your throat. So you see it will be a little ticklish for you in the long-run. And now, you may do as you like. As I said before, I shan't mix myself up in your affairs." And Corporal M'Dunn left Blenkins where he was, and once more joined his comrades.

After a time the sound of horses' hoofs was heard behind them. The soldiers looked round and caught sight of a single rider. Blenkins, who saw danger in everything, stopped so that the others should catch him up, for in their company he was at anyrate sure of his life. He scanned the rider carefully, and to his astonishment he recognised Isaac Van der Nath.

The lad came on at full gallop, and soon caught up the soldiers. He rode up to Blenkins, let his horse go slowly, and asked breathlessly—

"Is it true?"

At once Blenkins understood what he referred to, and his eyes shone with a wicked delight. Perhaps he had hit home better than he thought.

"Yes, it is true!" he shouted. "Every word is true! You are a fool, boy, and your father is an ass! To the devil both of you!"

Isaac stared in bewilderment and almost stunned at the malicious face that was turned to him.

"Yes," Blenkins continued in a loud voice, eager to say as much as possible, "it was you who couldn't hold your tongue. It's your fault that the guns were found—ha, ha, ha!"

Isaac bit his lip hard, bent down over his horse's neck, and struck Blenkins in the face with his clenched fist.

"Dog!" was all he said, and he wheeled round his horse and galloped off.

Blenkins yelled with pain and rage. He tore open his coat so that the buttons flew off, and drew a revolver from his breast pocket. But before he had time to fire, the watchful corporal struck the weapon from his hand.

"One does not shoot at boys," he said mockingly. "We don't need this proof of your courage. We know already the sort of fellow you are."

Blenkins collapsed, weak in every limb. He had scarcely enough strength to pick up the revolver and put it in his pocket again.

Corporal M'Dunn chuckled to himself, for he imagined that he had succeeded in thwarting Blenkins's plans, whatever they might be. Blenkins, on the other hand, believed that he had failed, and he ground his teeth in wrath at the thought. Yet both were equally mistaken, for in war an apparently good act is so often resolved into something entirely opposite.

But, satisfied with their day's work, the soldiers tramped over the plain, Blenkins painfully dragging his feet behind them, and from time to time carefully feeling his aching back.

After half a day's march, dusty and weary, they reached the camp.

"I am going to the commanding officer now," said Corporal M'Dunn to Blenkins; "come if you wish."

Blenkins followed, not knowing what he had better do. He stood outside the tent biting his nails.

Having submitted his report, the corporal passed out. As he passed Blenkins he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, as if to imply that he was utterly indifferent as to anything he might choose to do.

Blenkins stood alone outside the tent. He felt weak and wretched. He had sought revenge, and had obtained a thrashing, and he was sick of everything. He shivered in his thin threadbare coat, and his whisky-sodden brain suddenly began to work again with feverish activity.

It was no cheerful picture that he conjured up. He

knew himself to be a wretched outcast. How he had become so, how his lot had turned out more tragic than that of others, he did not stop to inquire. He had lost his chance. Well, he had himself to blame. And yet, what vexed him most was that those who now made use of him should spit upon him. He drew his coat closer round his body, for it was really cold. His chin sank upon his breast as he pondered. After all, he would have liked to know how it was that he had become the wretch which, in the estimation of other people and even of himself, he now was. He was weighed down with loneliness ; the contempt of all the world bowed his back. Yes, he was a useless Pariah, a homeless dog, a contemptible wretch. He shivered so that his teeth chattered, and he had nothing in the whole world to warm himself with except his miserable, petty revenge.

Blenkins cast an ugly look across the plain. Well, he might be a mangy cur that bit wherever it could. But now there was war in the land, and now a fellow who wasn't over nice might be of some importance yet. Had he not done his countrymen one good turn, and . . . ? No, what was the use of standing there deceiving himself? He shivered in the cold wind, and was fit to cry aloud with bitterness. If now he were to fall ill into the bargain, when should he find occasion for his revenge?

And over the plain the moon threw her pale light—the same full moon that, ten miles away, looked down upon the dead divinity student and his two brothers.

CHAPTER III

THE SACRIFICE

“ **A**ND it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

“ 2. And He said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

“ 3. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

“ 9. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

“ 10. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.”

Van der Nath sat at the table and read aloud from his Bible. His voice did not tremble, although his eyes were full of bitter tears and his heart of smarting pain. He kept constantly at the same page, and when he got to the eleventh verse he began afresh. How many times he had already read the words he did not know. It was quite clear to him that there could be no going any farther. Yet one thing was certain: his fatherland demanded the

fulfilment of his oath, but something akin to intoxication clouded his brain. He read the same verses again and again, thinking what a fine thing it was that the old patriarch, without any hesitation or thought, should have obeyed his Master's command.

The door opened and Isaac entered.

Van der Nath pushed the book away from him and rose up.

"Did you ask the man?" he said, and his voice sounded as gentle as if the words had no unusual import.

"Yes. It is true."

Von der Nath placed his hand over his eyes as if the light dazzled them.

"How did you get to know it?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Oom Flick and Oom Zimmer were talking about the guns. I was in the room with David, and"— He stopped and bent his head.

"Go on, Isaac."

"They knew we were there, and when Oom Zimmer said that it wasn't right for children to hear what they were saying, Oom Flick answered, 'I know Abraham Van der Nath and his son; they would not betray their country—they would rather die.'"

"Did Erasmus Flick say that?"

"'They would rather die,' he said."

"And the other—I mean the man you have just been after?"

"He came here, and I let him stay; it was so wretched to hear only old Betty's talk. He helped me many a time; he used to read from our Bible, and he said he believed. 'I am your friend, Isaac,' he said, 'and you are a man now. Men have no secrets from their friends. I look upon myself as a friend of you both, and I want to know something so that I may preserve it as a cherished treasure in my inmost soul.' He said a great deal more as well that I don't remember. I believed him, and told him of the spot where Flick had said the guns were buried."

Van der Nath nodded. It was all so simple and commonplace that there was nothing to be said in reply.

"Sit down," he said.

Isaac obeyed. He wondered to himself what the consequence of his mistake would be, and an uncertain fear took possession of him. He saw his father's deadly pale face, and the drops of sweat that gathered on his brow and ran down his cheeks, and he suspected that the issues involved must be very great.

Van der Nath read again the 22nd chapter of Genesis from the beginning to the eleventh verse. Then he folded his hands over the Bible as it lay open before him, and began to talk. He told his son of the night meeting out on the plain, and his eyes glistened as he repeated part of Simeon Flick's sermon which had remained in his memory.

Isaac got up and listened, a spellbound expression in his face.

"Yes, yes," he exclaimed; "now it is the turn of the old men and the children; we will all die for our country!"

"Wait!" said Van der Nath harshly. He heard how hard his own voice rang, and it gave him a start. Something urged him to speak on, and to speak as shortly and sharply as before, but he was conscious that his heart beat feverishly with such a terrible pain that he shook in every limb. Two opposing forces contended within him for the supremacy; he froze and perspired at the same time. He spoke, and the purport of his words startled him. He told of the oath he had sworn, he repeated the words he had added of his own free will, and when he had finished he asked, with his clenched fists resting upon the leaves of the Bible—

"What am I to do?"

He had intended to say something entirely different, but these words seemed to be forced from him. He longed to take the boy in his arms and press him to his beating heart, but instead he stood before his son, cold and immovable.

With a plaintive sigh Isaac had sunk into his chair again, and hid his face in his hands.

"Father! . . . father!" he stammered.

“What am I to do?” said Van der Nath for the second time.

Isaac looked up at him. Now at last he understood. The solemnity of the moment infused a new look into the smiling, childish eyes, and it was with a manly strength in his voice that he replied—

“I am ready.”

Van der Nath tottered like an oak tree severed from its roots, whose trunk and crown are for the moment held together by a few weak fibres. He steadied himself against the table, tore open his coat and waistcoat to give himself air, and dug his nails into the flesh of his chest, in order to deaden by means of physical pain the agony that tortured him.

“My son! My son!” he exclaimed.

Isaac saw how his father was suffering; he noted his helpless, wandering look, betokening an anguish too great for mortal strength to bear. He approached his father, laid his hand lightly on his arm, and said gently but firmly—

“You must keep your oath!”

“But I didn’t know”—

“That’s just why!”

Van der Nath’s hands shook so that he was obliged to rest them on the table. His strength was gone, his last hope extinguished, and sobbing he prayed.

“O God!” he cried, “did I sin in returning home, because I would no longer slay human beings who knew Thy commandments less than I? Was the desertion of my friends in their need so great an offence that Thou must now lay this burden upon my shrinking shoulders? Lord, have compassion upon me and . . . !” He could no longer speak plainly. His anguish of mind threatened to suffocate him, and only a hoarse rattle came from his throat. Then the confused expression which had once before frightened his son again appeared in his face. Presently he laughed cunningly.

“Isaac,” he whispered; “run out, take the horse, and ride off!”

"No," answered the lad firmly. "I did it, and you shall keep your oath."

"I cannot—cannot! Think!—to die! Isaac, my son, spare your father!"

"No," answered Isaac, "for now I know what I have done, and I am ready. O father, this country of which you have just been speaking, this country where men and women are suffering doubly as much as we—is not my life also worthy of it?"

"Isaac!" said Van der Nath with feverish haste. "Take the horse and ride westward—do you hear?"

"And then that man will tell it all to everybody in his own way, and they will curse our name!"

The father clutched at his forehead. To him it seemed wonderful that he should be trying to persuade his son to flee, while his son persisted in refusing. As he thought of it he seemed to hear a voice whisper, "You are a coward, Abraham Van der Nath." And he seemed to hear himself answer, "Yes, I am." But Isaac spoke on, and to the father's ears the words sounded just as harsh and pitiless as his own had done.

"Should I go on living after my father had broken his oath? Do you think I could?"

"I will join de Vlies again," said Van der Nath quietly. "I see that we human beings cannot decide our actions for ourselves. I go back from everything! I will kill—others. I will sacrifice my convictions, my faith; is not that enough?"

"A man can never sacrifice too much!" The answer came from Isaac's lips, but the words seemed to be spoken by some one else. Then another Isaac spoke, in what seemed a voice of thunder that pierced the mist that lay over the father's mind.

"A few minutes ago," he said, "I was a child; but now that I have got to know of this I am a child no longer."

With a half idiotic smile his father heard without understanding the meaning of the words. His thoughts were wholly occupied by something else.

"Isaac," he said, "go out into the stable and fetch

the gun that is hidden under the fourth plank from the door."

The lad nodded, and went to the door, but there he stopped and said—

"No one of our name has ever sworn falsely?"

"No, no," murmured his father absent-mindedly.

"And no one ever shall either," added Isaac as he went out.

Van der Nath mechanically wiped the perspiration from his forehead, muttering—

"When he sees the horse he will think over the matter, and when I come out in half an hour's time he will be gone." He broke into a long chuckle at the thought, and when his elation ended in sobs he was angry with himself for having allowed his mind to wander from the idea. "Yes, of course," he said, as if speaking to someone whose observations both irritated and disquieted him,—"Yes, of course, Isaac will ride far away. I shall not be able to reach him on foot—it is not to be thought of." And he chuckled again, while big shining tears ran down his cheeks. He tried his utmost to convince himself that the boy would flee. He had succeeded so well that he did not notice that the door had opened, and that his son had come in again with the gun in his hand.

"See here," said Isaac; "now all is ready."

Van der Nath's heart ceased to beat. He gazed at the lad who within the space of the last hour had ripened into manhood, and who with undaunted brow was prepared to meet his fate. He envied his son his strength, and felt that he must be led by some higher power. He sank down on his knees. He must do what both saw to be his duty. All the colour had vanished from his cheeks; his hair hung, damp with the sweat of agony, over his face; for a moment he feared that he must go mad.

"It is Thy command, O Lord!" he cried. "Thy will, not mine, be done!" He spoke as simply as his son had done before. He felt unable to contend against more than one, and he bowed before that stronger Power who had given Isaac his strength—gladly, as if it were his

pleasure to submit to the inevitable. "He is not quite in his senses," thought the exhausted man; "he does not understand what it means."

Isaac seemed to read his father's secret thoughts, for he went to the cupboard in the corner and took down a little book from the top shelf. Almost devoutly he carried it to the table and placed it beside the Bible.

It was a much-thumbed and dog-eared volume, with a dirty cover. Van der Nath glanced sideways at it; he did not anticipate any good from its presence there just then.

Isaac searched for a particular page, and when he had found it he pushed the book over to his father and asked him to read.

But the printed words failed to make any impression upon the uneducated peasant, to whom the Bible was the one household book. He would neither hear nor look at anything that was designed to make him do that which he now dreaded more than anything in the world. With an impatient movement he pushed the volume aside.

Isaac looked at him reproachfully, and by the tender care with which he drew the book to himself it was easy to see what a strong influence its contents had exercised upon his youthful imagination.

"I borrowed it from Simeon Flick," he said slowly. "He brought it with him from Tellenbosch."

"What is it all about?" asked Van der Nath, glancing with obvious reluctance at the book in the lad's hands.

"*The Lives of Great Men and Good Women*," read Isaac from the title-page. "Have you ever heard of the mother of the Gracchi, father?"

Van der Nath shook his head gloomily.

"Or of Hannibal and Scipio?"

"No."

"But William Tell and his son?"

"Tell?" said Van der Nath; "there was a German"—

"No, no," said Isaac; "he died several hundred years ago." And then he began to relate the old story of the father who shot the apple from his son's head. He told it with much youthful exuberance, introducing remarks of his

own wherever he thought it necessary, and was lavish with such epithets as "great" and "glorious."

"H'mph," said Van der Nath when he had finished; "I could undertake to do that shot just as well."

But Isaac proceeded to explain the conditions of the feat, and then both entered into a serious discussion of the question of the certainty of the crossbow as a weapon. The father allowed himself for the moment to be interested. It was so pleasant to be able to forget. The size of the apple was considered, and the distance as it would have appeared to a man who knew what an important matter it was; and they almost began to quarrel when Van der Nath essayed to depreciate the Tell exploit. His instinct warned him against allowing himself to be carried away by Isaac's enthusiastic admiration, and the lad felt wounded by his contradictions. And when Isaac at length found it impossible to convince his father that others before him had risked much more without any hesitation, he grew tired of it, and shutting up his book, he carried it back again to the cupboard.

Van der Nath seemed to behold his son as through a veil of mist. It was the same boy whom he had left only a little while ago, and yet it was not the same. He saw the change, but without being able to tell when or how it had happened. But he did not ponder over it; his strength was now as melted wax. Although he could distinguish only a few of the links in the long chain of circumstances, great and small, by which he was encircled, he bowed before the inevitable; it was not he, but another and a stronger, who must prevail. Away in the loneliness of the great veldt, where the storm roars and the rain for months weeps swift rivers, the minds of men become hardened and obdurate, and men and women who in everything else consult their Bibles, spare neither themselves nor others when they are convinced that something must and ought to happen.

"Not here," said Van der Nath after an uncomfortably long silence; "away there—where I took my oath."

Isaac nodded in assent; he felt a veneration for the spot, although he had never seen it.

"Shall I saddle the horse?" he asked.

"Yes, do."

The lad went out quietly, with a flush of pleasure on his face, and his father gazed after him as if in a dream.

In the half-darkness of the stable Isaac busied himself with the saddle and bridle. He smiled gently to himself; his smile was that of a child, but behind it lay the seriousness of a man. What was about to happen occupied his thoughts least.

He had often listened to the talk of the elders; now and again he had picked up disconnected phrases which had been flung out with a wild violence and had been accompanied by curses or lamentations, and these utterances had all taken root in his memory. His fancy played upon uncertain, jarring strings, and the theme of the melody that was drawn forth dealt only with destruction and death. He drew conclusions which would have frightened anyone but a child, and he smiled at them. What he saw about him daily in the land inspired him with an exaltation, while his loneliness, which had also furnished the occasion of his fault, had done the rest. Just when he had striven up to the point where the path diverges from the little world of childhood towards the great uplands of manhood, he to whom he had given his friendship had deceived him, and shown himself to be a wretched traitor. So Isaac laughed at himself contemptuously; he was not fit to live.

And then the book with the lives of the great men and women of all time had fallen into his hands. To be like these heroes was surely something worth striving for. To sacrifice himself was his dream, and if that was impossible it was still left to him to make good the fault he had committed, as so many in that book had done. Now his father was in danger of breaking his oath; his hesitation and anguish betrayed him. Was it not his son's duty to step in and prevent it? Yes, Isaac felt that the moment when his sacrifice was needed had come, and he deter-

mined that it should not pass unused. He smiled again at the thought, and he was still smiling when he re-entered the room.

"Shall we ride far now, father?" he asked.

Van der Nath turned away so that he should not see his son's bright look. With trembling hands he seized his rifle, loaded it, and went to the door. He too smiled, but painfully, and with a faint glimpse of questioning uncertainty in his eyes. He still hoped.

"We shall go past Zimmer's farm," he said slowly.

"That will take us roundabout for three miles," put in Isaac hesitatingly.

"We will go that way."

By his father's tone of decision Isaac knew that it would be useless to make any further objection. Smiling as before, he went towards the door.

His father followed after him, the same strange look in his eyes, carrying his Bible and his rifle. They would take the longer way, for he would not abandon his last hope that one of the enemy's patrols might unexpectedly appear on the horizon. If this should happen, he would ride right up to the soldiers and fire at them; then they would both fall, father and son, perhaps at the same moment. His heart beat faster; a merciful Providence did exist, and he still hoped for the only good fortune that could remain for him. Silently he got into the saddle and helped Isaac up behind him.

The lad threw his arms round his father's waist, laid his head upon his shoulder, and gazed out into the darkness that slowly crept over the weary earth, wrapping in its embrace both the evil and the good. The horse began to move beneath its double burden, the youth smiling into the darkness, the man looking eagerly for the enemy—the deliverer—and praying that death might stretch to him his helping hand, seeing that men could now do nothing.

"What was it that de Vlies said?" thought Van der Nath. "Yes, that in war everything is possible, everything—even this? That however terrible the pictures of war that one's imagination may portray, the reality surpasses

everything. But when even that which seemed unthinkable becomes possible, why should not one dare to hope something from mere chance?"

This was what Van der Nath now did. Behind every big stone by the roadside he imagined that a soldier lay in hiding. Every sound that reached his ears he imagined to be the report of a rifle. Was not that shadow over there a sentry?—or . . . no, it was a cactus bush. But over there . . . there . . . no, there was nothing there either. There was nothing to be seen. Not a patrol passed across the plain; as father and son rode through the darkness there was nothing but silence.

They had already passed Zimmer's farm. There was no light in the windows, and no one came out to look after them. They were far out on the great plain, over which the moon now shed its pale beams. Suddenly Van der Nath reined in the horse, and cocked his rifle. He heard a faint sound close by, and all the blood rose to his head.

"At last!" he exclaimed, with a sigh. "Did you hear, Isaac?"

"It was a meercat, father." And Isaac smiled compassionately at the thought that his father should still take the trouble to hope, although the goal of their silent expedition, the great heap of stones, already appeared like a shadow above the ground only a mile away.

Van der Nath reddened like a thief caught in the act, and shrank together as he sat in the saddle. Hope was gone irrevocably, and although the horse went only at a foot's pace, it appeared to him that they were approaching the heap of stones at breathless speed. He sobbed aloud, heart-rendingly, as only a man can sob. But Isaac still smiled, his lips slightly parted, and tenderly stroked his father's hair.

A pale grey streak of dawn penetrated the small windowpanes of the farm. Some heavy rain-drops beat down upon the thatched roof, and a vicious gust of wind blew in at the stable door, which swung back upon its creaking hinges, and finally slammed to as if tired of the game.

The tramp of hoofs sounded outside ; the door of the dwelling-house was opened, and Van der Nath crossed the threshold. His bearing was no longer the same as before ; his eyes wandered, vacant and lustreless, over the objects in the parlour, as if the life behind them was dead. Otherwise there was nothing changed in his appearance. He carried his Bible in his hand, but when he had come in he dropped it mechanically without noticing it. The book fell on the floor, and he kicked it aside with his foot, an act of carelessness from which, at other times, his sincere piety would have preserved him. With sluggish footsteps he went over to the wall on which his wife's portrait hung. He stood before it, clutching at his forehead, as if to arrange the confusion of thoughts that lay behind it. At length he muttered in a hollow voice—

“Alone !”

He shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference—at himself, at everything. He longed to cry, but he had no tears ; he longed to pray, but the words failed him. Within his brain his troubled thoughts performed a veritable witches' dance. Sometimes they came storming down upon him so that he could not keep pace with them, and all became an unintelligible chaos ; sometimes they paced with measured tread, one by one, through his aching head, leaving a long space between ; or else, failing to make their appearance at all, they left before him what seemed a great gaping chasm which nothing could fill.

“Alone !” he said again, looking at the portrait on the wall.

It was a common, black crayon drawing, made by an unskilled hand. A few rough lines gave an impression of the dead woman's features, which stood out against a background of large sooty spots.

Van der Nath called to mind how a needy journeyman painter had one day come to the district, and had gone from farm to farm offering his work. The man painted furniture and portraits, both in the same manner. Some gave him work ; the price he asked was moderate, and the result was everywhere mediocre. Fru Van der Nath took

pity on the fellow, who imagined that he could do everything. He assured her that a portrait of herself would be a pleasant surprise to her husband ; so, half curious, half suspicious, she consented to "sit to him," as the wall-smudger called it, for two hours. It would not be true to say that the result was more happy than elsewhere ; but she was quite satisfied with the painter's crooked lines, which, he assured her, represented a faithful image of herself.

Van der Nath had been really very pleased when the sheet of paper was spread out before him. He gave a deep laugh, and slapped his wife's arm in his delight. Then the portrait was hung upon the wall. There it had hung year after year ; the simple people who saw it nodded approvingly as they looked at it, and when Van der Nath said it was his Sarah's portrait, they nodded again and said kindly that they should have known it was she. Yes, simple effort as it was, it had given him joy, for his artistic canons were not high.

His wife?—yes. He called to mind the time when he went to her father's farm to court her, the youngest daughter of the house ; how they had sat up, and the long candles Sarah had lighted. It had been a happy marriage—as happy as it had been short. After two years she had borne him Isaac—they had given him that name because they were called Abraham and Sarah. And then—then his wife passed away. She expired like their two betrothal candles, which, after burning brightly the whole night, had flickered out in their sockets as the sun cast its early rays over the veldt. She had not been ill, or at least had not complained ; but one morning she died in his arms—one bright, sunlit morning when everything was ready for the day's work.

Van der Nath's religious fervour helped him to regard his wife's death as something which had to be. He did not complain ; he only retired within himself, and became a reserved and taciturn man. But when his year of mourning was over, the neighbours began to visit him and exhort him to marry again. But he let them talk, scarcely answer-

ing them, and when they were gone he would go and gaze at his wife's portrait.

His Sarah had been quite an ordinary woman, a good wife, and a clever housekeeper. But her early death had cast a halo over everything relating to her, and when he had gathered together all the little tokens of their married life they formed a packet upon which he had been accustomed to feast his eyes for years afterwards, and which had become to him more and more sacred as year succeeded year.

At last all the Ooms and Tantas grew tired of wasting their exhortations upon a man whose consistent obstinacy neither the most transparent hints nor the most convincing arguments availed to shake. So they had left him to his fate, liking him none the less in consequence.

He had walked unswervingly the path he had chosen. He had loved Sarah as every honest man loves his wife, and when she was gone the child filled her place. The boy was like his mother, and he was their only child. The father therefore regarded him in a different fashion from that in which his neighbours were wont to look upon their numerous offspring. The yearning for love which is born in every healthy man's nature showed itself in the grown man's endless solicitude for the child. There were few strings in his world of feeling, but they vibrated all the more strongly, and Isaac became the centre of all the good in his nature. For Isaac nothing was good enough; for his sake no devotion could suffice. And thus the two had become all in all to each other.

And now his son was no longer there. The father was alone, like a tree which the storm has broken, after stripping it of all its leaves.

It was about midnight when they had reached the heap of stones from which Simeon Flick had thundered forth his sermon, and where the terrible oath had been sworn. With the tears rolling down their cheeks, the father and son dug the grave which was to receive the body of one of them. When the work was done Van der Nath prayed once more for mercy, although he had seen that all was now in vain.

He tore at his hair and beat his breast ; he humbled himself in the dust and begged for grace ; he offered his own life in exchange ; he cursed the whole world. Above them stretched the transcendent heavens, cold to every prayer ; over the earth fell the pale beams of the moon, tinging the darkness with their melancholy light. At length, seeing that nothing availed, Van der Nath seized his Bible, opened it, and read aloud—

“ ‘ And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham : and he said, Here am I. ’

“ ‘ And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him : for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.’

“ ‘ Yes,’ cried Van der Nath in his deadly anguish ; “ a miracle, O Lord, a miracle.”

But the heavens gave no answer to his supplication ; only the pale moon shone amid the vast expanse. The worm that writhed upon the earth existed for itself alone. Then Van der Nath fell to the ground and lay motionless.

At the same moment he heard a shot. He sprang to his feet. What was it ? The enemy ?—an English patrol ? He was ready to cry, “ Thank God ! The miracle has happened ! ” And he prepared himself for a fight, in which he meant to fall.

But about him all was just as still as before. Nothing seemed changed . . . Yes—there, on the very spot where old Piet Muller had once lain,—there now lay another . . . Isaac.

Van der Nath tottered towards him, and knelt at his side. He saw, and understood.

Isaac had suspected that his father would not have the courage to keep his oath. While he prayed and suffered, the lad had sacrificed himself. He had taken off his right shoe, steadied the butt-end of his rifle against the ground, placed his chin to the muzzle, and pulled the trigger with his foot.

What had passed in the lad’s mind ? Whence had he

derived this incredible courage? Mute amazement at what must have taken place within that mangled brain seized the father, and now that all was over he remained strangely still. He did not give himself time to answer his own questions; had he tried he knew that it would have been beyond him.

He fondled the boy's body with his big, awkward hands. He kissed the lifeless face, and raised it from the ground. It was strange, but although his agony was acute he felt at the same time proud of his son's sacrifice. Isaac was a true son of his fatherland. His father could now look everyone in the face with his head erect. The youth had erred through ignorance, but now he had paid for it.

Van der Nath bore the body to the grave, and covered it with sand and stones. He worked until the sweat ran down his face; he tore his nails to pieces and wounded his hands. At the head, with its terrible bullet hole, he placed two large stones, one on each side, and over these he laid another which was broad and flat. Isaac's beloved face should never be pressed by the earth. When he had finished the resting-place he knelt beside it to pray.

Not a sound came from his lips, no tear came from his eyes. His head fell forward, and he bowed himself in the dust. His sense of feeling was dead; the calm of death lay over him; around him was nothing but an infinite, annihilating void.

Then the lonely man rose up, took his Bible and rifle, mounted his horse, and rode away from the place of sacrifice. He cared not which way he went—whether home, or out into the wide world. He was tired of life, and longed for the sleep of eternity—he too. As his horse went onward he thought he heard a voice close to his ear. At first he fancied it came from within, and then he raised his sunken eyelids and smiled sadly. He distinctly saw the form of old Piet Muller beside him, and heard his feeble voice exhorting him to stop.

"Do you too wish for vengeance, because I kept so far out of your way?" asked Van der Nath.

"No, no," answered the old man in a friendly tone.

“No, no, Abraham. Who, do you think, can be revenged? No one—no one. People allow the evil that is in them to form their thoughts and wishes, and these they realise in their actions. They call it revenge, but it is only an outcome of their evil nature, and it yields them no satisfaction, for the good within them whispers that they have done wrong. When a whole nation allows its evil side to get the upper hand, then there is war, and, in spite of the multitude of big words which the people scatter abroad, their conscience speaks otherwise than their tongues. You see, Abraham, we were born blind; we had our eyes opened only when it was too late—when death came. He teaches us to see. He has taken the dearest that you possessed. Open your eyes now, and see! Life lays heavy burdens upon our shoulders, and we think we do wisely when we throw them off. But it is unwise, for it is not right; that I know, for my eyes are opened. And now I will give you the best advice one man can bestow upon another: ‘Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.’ And you will never be tired of receiving blows! And the harder you are smitten, the more must you humble yourself in your own mind; and some day you will attain as high as it is given to human beings to reach, and be worthy of that name which you and all others unjustly bear. But you must not strike in return!”

“I cannot bow myself so low,” said Van der Nath slowly.

The shadow shook his head sympathetically.

“Those who wish to see shall see,” he whispered, and vanished into space.

Then Van der Nath had spurred his horse and ridden home. And all the time he had thought of nothing but Piet Muller, and the unnecessarily wide berth he had given him as he lay on the ground.

And now he sat staring with stony eyes at his wife’s portrait. How long he sat he knew not. Fresh thoughts crowded constantly upon him, chasing the old away, laying hold of him for a time, only to be ousted again by others.

They were a motley confusion of bad and good, but the bad predominated, for he was a desperate man, and boundless affection and wild hate contended for the mastery within his brain. He was broken and hopeless, but he was now without fear. The worst that could happen had already come to pass. Avenge himself? On whom? He whom he might strike might be the least guilty. No; he must humble himself; but not so low as Piet Muller's shadow had said—no, not so low.

He touched himself to convince himself that it was really he who sat there. When he came to look at his hands, he saw that there was blood upon them. He rose and looked upwards. He stood for a time defiantly, with head erect and eyes upraised to heaven.

“It is too much!” he cried.

He waited awhile, as if for an answer. Then fresh thoughts overpowered him. He took down his wife's portrait from the wall, folded it in four, and placed it in his breast pocket. He did not kiss it, for he possessed the peasant's strong contempt for all affectionate demonstration. Now that he intended to go away never to return, he would not leave the piece of paper behind to be desecrated by the glance of strangers. Then he took his Bible and went out into the kitchen. His movements were like those of a sleep-walker, and his eyes stared before him absently and lustreless. On the blank page at the beginning of the book were written in big clumsy letters the names of his parents, of himself and his sisters, and of his wife and his son Isaac. There would have appeared also the names of other Van der Naths unborn, had not fate decreed that they were not to be. He read over all the dear names, smiling at each. Then he placed the book in the fireplace, laid wood about it, and set fire to the heap.

He blew upon the first feeble flames, and soon the fire was well alight. It was done: the name of Van der Nath no longer existed.

He went quietly out, and wandered through all the rooms, nodding slowly at all the well-known objects. And

so, with a heavy heart, he prepared to leave his home. He took the rifle that leaned against the wall, threw his cartridge-belt over his shoulder, and went out into the morning air. While the gentle light of dawn spread its promise over the land, he went forth in quest of death and the answer to all his questionings.

The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens. The hours advanced, one after another, and late in the morning the old Kaffir cook crept down from the loft to prepare breakfast for her master. To her the silence did not seem strange ; with her broken voice she crooned a song about the blood of the Lamb, and sat herself down outside the house in the sunshine. It would be time enough to begin work when the master or his son put in an appearance. It did not astonish her that they should both be away ; perhaps they had ridden off to see what mischief the enemy had been up to. So old Betty nodded her head as she allowed the sun to warm her stiff limbs ; it was pleasant to be alone and to have nothing to think about.

Suddenly she started and looked about her uneasily. The Lord have mercy ! There came some strange soldiers riding towards her, their weapons gleaming and their horses neighing. She ran in, seized the ladder, clambered up to the loft, and dragged the ladder up after her. Her teeth chattering with fear, she crept behind the empty fruit-bin in the west gable. If only they went their way without discovering her ! They must see that there was no one at home. She lay there trembling, listening with her ear to the floor, praying her childlike prayers.

The doors beneath were thrown open noisily ; there was the sound of heavy footsteps, and a troop of men entered. They searched in every corner, threw the furniture about, and tore down the hangings of the rooms. With the butt-end of their rifles they smashed in the corner cupboard ; they shattered the window-panes, and strewed the household utensils about the floor. There was much laughter, and the din became louder every moment.

“ Search thoroughly ! ” commanded a stern voice. “ They have arms hidden everywhere.”

"They are too cunning to hide them in their living-rooms," answered another voice. "Look in the stable and the outhouse. Up to the loft, men!"

Old Betty swooned and heard no more.

Under the command of one lieutenant a detachment of police troops had come there, accompanied by Blenkins. He had nerved himself up again, and he had been lucky enough to convince the major that just then the district was in need of a thorough overhauling. By this was meant that all men and boys above twelve should be arrested, all weapons seized, and the women and little children taken off to some place where they would be prevented from giving their men-folk information.

The major, who only the day before had received further censures from his superior officer, was in no humour for treating others with leniency. He listened readily to Blenkins's insidious advice, and sent out a detachment of soldiers to quell the last remnants of resistance.

The men who had come to Van der Nath's house had searched two other farms earlier in the day. A couple of rusty guns and a few hundred Mauser cartridges had been discovered at the last place. This evidence of disaffection was overwhelming, and the smoking ruins which they left behind them showed how swift and inexorable had been the punishment. Their success had put the soldiers in a cheerful mood, and here they expected to make even more important discoveries, for the owner was said to be a zealous patriot—in war the greatest crime, in the eyes of the enemy, of which a man can be guilty.

Like a madman Blenkins rushed through the rooms, dashing aside everything that lay in his way. Encouraged by his example the men did the same, and when nothing of a suspicious nature was found, they were as furious as they would have been had their search been crowned with success. A wild desire to destroy seized hold of them, and the example of Blenkins, into whose motives no one stopped to inquire, served to redouble their zeal.

"Not a living soul!" shouted Blenkins. "He has

taken himself off with the boy! Pull down the roof of this rebel's nest! Be doing something, boys!"

The lieutenant sat on the sofa, and laughed at the men's eagerness. It amused him, and he did nothing to stay their destructiveness. Had not the Boers acted like this—like wild beasts—in Natal and other places, and was it not only right to retaliate?

A triumphant shout came from the loft. Some of the men had discovered old Betty. They dragged her to the hatch, and she crept trembling down the ladder. Then her strength failed her, and she fell to the ground unable to rise again. Blenkins wanted to make her tell where her master had hidden, and was about to shower kicks and blows upon her, but the soldiers had sense enough to keep him from actual violence.

"I will get her to speak!" he shouted, and he ran to the kitchen to fetch a burning log.

The lieutenant followed him curiously, but when he understood what means he intended to employ, he told him sharply that he must desist.

"No harm, sir," whispered the fellow insinuatingly. "I only want to frighten the old hag."

But the officer was not inclined to permit that sort of thing, and very much vexed Blenkins was obliged to abandon his plan. With a shrug of his shoulders the lieutenant turned to leave the kitchen. He had reached the door, when a loud cry from Blenkins caused him to turn round.

The spy was bending over the grate, stirring the ashes with a poker.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, as he gathered into a heap the material that had aroused his surprise. "What does this mean?" At the same moment he dropped the poker, and sprang up from the hearth as if he had been bitten by a snake.

"What have you got there?" asked the lieutenant, inspecting the stuff which the other had raked together. He saw an old steel hasp and some corner-pieces of the same metal, which had plainly belonged to a book. They were

black with the marks of the fire, and quite worthless, in no way designed to call forth either curiosity or terror.

Blenkins, however, appeared to be of a different opinion, for he now stood trembling, steadying himself against the doorpost. All the colour had left his face, and even his nose was red no longer.

“Whatever is the matter with you, fellow?”

“He has burned his Bible!” stammered Blenkins.

“Well, and what of that?”

“I am a dead man!” exclaimed the spy, beside himself.
“It means my life!”

He looked round apprehensively to every side. Then, rousing himself out of the state of helplessness that had so suddenly overpowered him, he hurried out of the door.

His terror was so real that the lieutenant was concerned. He hurried after him to demand an explanation.

“Stop a moment, man!” he shouted. “What do you mean by this madness?”

Blenkins did not hear him. He felt the ground sinking beneath him. He had been outmatched again. There was another also who thought of revenge.

“I know what it means when a Boer burns his Bible!” he muttered. “After that, he cares neither for heaven nor hell!” He hurried into the yard, and found his horse. Next moment he was in the saddle, galloping off westward, blind and deaf to the soldiers’ shouts and gesticulations. The one thing of which he was conscious was that the Free State was now too small for him, and that he must at once get as far away as a horse could carry him.

The lieutenant stood on the doorstep and gazed after the pitiable figure as it bent low over the horse’s neck. Nothing loth to be freed from his presence, he had decided not to stay his flight. And now that there was nothing more to be done there, he gave his men the order to mount, and after he had studied a list which he took from his breast pocket the company rode off towards the next farm.

“Zimmer,” read the lieutenant from the list. “The name sounds German; it ought to be a real pleasure to call upon that gentleman.”

Some miles ahead Blenkins rode on with slackened rein, showing no sign that he intended soon to stop. Fear sat behind him, and he spurred his horse unceasingly to fresh efforts. That Van der Nath should have taken his treachery to heart so deeply was more than he had dared to hope ; but now that it had happened he almost repented, wishing that his design had not been quite so successful. He shrugged his shoulders ; the thing was done now, and the farther he rode, the easier grew his mind. He had already put several miles behind him, and now that he began to think the matter over properly, what, he asked himself, could a fellow like Van der Nath—a rebel and an outlaw—do to a man like him, who . . . ? H'mph ! the best thing, perhaps, that he could do would be to trouble his mind no more about it.

Blenkins rode on all day. He thought it safest to get out of the country as soon as he could. His rôle there was played out, and besides, since there was nothing more to be got, why should he remain ? Night was beginning to fall, and he took from his saddle-pouch some pieces of bread and a slice of dried meat. He was a careful man, accustomed to prepare for everything, and so he had laid in supplies for a week. The horse had to be content with a maize-cake and a drink from a stream ; then it went on as before.

Blenkins now straightened his back, and his eyes sparkled with glee, for he thought of the bank-notes in his pocket, the pay for all his trouble. He had a good revolver, and he could rely upon his own cunning. The long pull at the whisky-flask in which he had just indulged seemed to make everything easy to him. The darkness which now surrounded him did not frighten him, but made him feel all the more secure ; he knew it well, it had helped him many a time before.

Suddenly he heard something rustle close beside him. He pulled up, terrified. His fears awoke anew ; he looked round about, while his hand fumbled for the flask which gave his heart courage and his arm strength. The vast plain was without a single farm. But—what was this ? A

dark form started up beside him ; the blade of a knife flashed in the dim light, and a panting voice said—

“ White Baas told lie to poor black man . . . !”

“ The devil take you, you Kaffir rascal ! What is it you want ? ” Blenkins was himself again, and held his revolver firmly in his right hand. He had something to lose, something that gave his life value and promised him many hours of enjoyment. For the time being he was rich, and he did not mean to deny himself any of the pleasures that money could procure him. In response to a violent dig of the spurs, his horse gave a dash forward, and the Kaffir, who had nearly taken him unawares, was outdistanced.

This untoward incident began to vex Blenkins, for he knew the almost incredible running powers of the Kaffirs. When he had considered the matter for a while he came to the conclusion that it would be best to be quits with his pursuer, whose shadow he could see gliding swiftly over the plain every time he cast a glance behind.

“ Old Muller’s driver,” he thought, and grinned wickedly. “ Well, he is of no consequence.”

He pulled up, and waited. To his joy he saw that he had not miscalculated. The Kaffir came running right up to him, his elbows pressed close to his side and his head sunk between his shoulders.

“ A fine runner,” said Blenkins half aloud, “ but also a great idiot, for he has no idea of seeking cover from bullets.”

Against the Kaffir he felt himself infinitely superior. He knew that his weapon gave him a tremendous advantage. He allowed him to come within a couple of paces ; then he aimed cold-bloodedly and fired.

The black man jumped aside, and Blenkins fired again. The Kaffir fell to the ground with a groan, and the rider laughed aloud.

“ Oh no, my boy,” he said jeeringly ; “ you mustn’t think a white man is going to allow himself to be robbed by such as you.” Greatly cheered by the incident, he rode on in great good humour, prepared to rely upon his own powers to overcome even greater difficulties.

Some hours afterwards the Kaffir boy Goliath came up to his dying father.

"Beware of the white men, my son!" panted the wounded man. "Run to the north till your feet bleed—run! Do not stop till you have got so far that the white men cannot reach you any more. It is foolish to strive against them. They require good of all others, but they do not hesitate themselves to do evil. And they are far the stronger."

Goliath stayed beside his father until he had breathed his last. Then he spread a piece of cloth over the dead man's face, and made his way to the north to try to get beyond the white man's reach. But whether he succeeded or not no one knows.

Blenkins rode on. He did not take time to see the effect of his shots. He felt nothing but an ardent longing for civilisation, with its public-houses and brothels. There were to be found the only things on which he set any store. The past no longer existed; it was not worth thinking about. His mind was bent upon the future enjoyment which he intended to procure with his lawfully and laboriously earned money.

When the tide of war breaks in upon a country it bears with it a mass of wreckage—humanity's scum; it awakens evil instincts, and furnishes the means of indulging evil passions. Blenkins was one of the scum which the flood had brought with it; he had used the war for his own ends, and he had been fortunate. Blenkins was quite convinced that he had rendered a service to the country which had kicked him, but which he nevertheless obstinately persisted in calling his, because even in its name there was a sure protection. So, whistling the refrain of a popular street song, he rode on, proud in the belief that he had done something that ought to obliterate the memory of certain ugly passages of the past and raise him higher than he had ever stood before.

But yet he was far from being out of all danger. Towards morning his horse began to stumble and trip; and while he was swearing over this misfortune, tugging at the brute's

mouth and spurring its flanks until the blood came, something seemed to spring up from the ground and bar his path.

It was Van der Nath who stood beside him, and, before he could comprehend where he could have sprung from, his enemy's rifle was resting against his saddle.

Once before Blenkins had thought that all was over with him ; this time he was sure of it. And again the same paralysing terror that had prevented him resisting the sjambok overcame him remorselessly. His hands hung helplessly by his side ; his brain throbbed wildly, and his heart ceased to beat.

Van der Nath, who had ridden straight up to him, looked him full in the face, and said simply—

“Poor fellow !”

He then made a movement with his hand, as if to wipe some dust from him, and Blenkins's horse, which seemed to share his master's terror, started off with him at full gallop, and was soon far away.

The spy's head swam. He understood nothing of what had happened, only that he was still alive and breathing. Then he recalled what Van der Nath had said, and he grew mad with rage. The words now hit him like a blow in the face. Should he—should he not ride back and inform his friends that the field-cornet was still in the district ? His friends—ha, ha, ha ! Yes, they were indeed his friends. No, they might manage their affairs as best they could. Van der Nath had burnt his Bible ; he was certainly a dangerous man, although his eyes had been so lustreless and vacant, and . . . H'mph ! he could not understand it.

He looked cautiously behind him, and in the far distance he descried the lonely man sitting motionless in his saddle, his eyes turned up to heaven. Had Blenkins been near enough he would have heard him saying—

“Have I humbled myself enough, O Lord ?”

With his rusty spurs Blenkins urged on his bleeding horse, for he must hasten. There was much to entice him, but more that drove him forward. After such a startling time as he had experienced, he would require an entire

week and an unheard-of quantity of spirits to make him quite himself again.

When last he was heard of he was in a public-house in Kimberley. He was in the company of a full bottle and an eager war correspondent, who, notebook in hand and with ready pencil, was waiting the good pleasure of Mr. Blenkins in order to obtain from him some special information which he had volunteered, together with a short account embodying his ideas as to the proper mode of conducting a campaign. Thereafter the spy disappeared into the oblivion from which he had emerged, and to which he properly belonged.

But far away in another region rode a lonely man. His rifle hung over the saddle before him, and he eagerly scanned the horizon for those who would free him from the life which had become such an insufferably heavy burden to him.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE BRINK

THE long six months of the dry season were over, and the parched earth drank thirstily of the flood. The wind whistled in the cactus bushes, splitting the fleshy leaves and snapping the branches, while the rain splashed monotonously in torrents upon the ground.

In the midst of the storm, which had so completely transformed the land, rode a solitary horseman. The reins lay loosely over the horse's neck, and the rider's arms hung inertly by his sides. He had uncovered his head, and the rain dripped in an unending stream from his soaking clothes. The horse went at a walking pace, now and then turning his head as if mutely questioning what this mad journey through rain and mist, cold and storm, could mean. But the man saw nothing and felt nothing ; he seemed insensible to everything.

At times he would spur his horse half unconsciously, as if to escape from some pursuing terror. But the memory of some past event seemed to be ever at his side, impossible to elude. For many days, by day and night together, he roamed on without a goal, resting mechanically without knowing what he did, mounting his horse absently, and stretching out his hands from time to time as if to welcome some deliverer. But, except himself, not a living soul was to be seen upon the trackless plain. Whenever the wind, between the rain-torrents, bore any strange sound towards him, he straightened himself, clutched his rifle, and waited ; but whatever sounds were borne upon the wind, nothing came.

And now a long space of time, which he had made no attempt to reckon, lay behind him. The rain-torrents had gradually ceased, and now and then the sun shone. Another season was about to take possession of the wilds. And still he rode on, not knowing whither he went—on, and still on.

He had now entered a hilly district, where the valleys formed the best of hiding-places. The sun's rays seemed to rouse him somewhat from his mental torpor, and his mind was now capable of pursuing a definite train of thought. Here, surely, he must at last find that which he sought.

The answer came in the sharp crack of a rifle, and the whistle of a bullet close to his head. He awoke immediately from his distraction, and felt once more that he was a human being whom a gracious providence had taken under its protection. But instead of taking up a position of defence, he raised his hands in thanks to that higher Power whose existence he had for so many days forgotten. Then he stood and waited for the next shot.

Fifty paces in front of him a man rose up from behind some boulders. With his rifle ready to fire again, he defiantly approached the rider, who drew a deep sigh as he forced his unwilling horse to face his assailant. The latter stopped suspiciously, raising his weapon and then lowering it, for the strange movements of the horseman could not but excite his wonder. Evidently he was asking himself what it could mean, and as a mistake was within the bounds of possibility, he too waited expectantly.

When they had come ten paces nearer each other, the man who had fired suddenly dropped the butt-end of his rifle on the ground, and exclaimed—

“Van der Nath !”

Van der Nath started, as if some wholly unexpected sound had reached his ears. He put his hand to his forehead, and a tear rolled slowly down his cheek. He realised that his hope had been vain. Presently he pulled himself together, fixed his eyes upon the speaker, and, when he had recognised him, said in his turn—

“Westhuizen !”

The man nodded.

Mechanically Van der Nath dismounted and went towards him to shake his hand.

“Do you come as a friend ?” asked Westhuizen, stepping back a pace.

Van der Nath shrugged his shoulders. The offence that lay in the question did not wound him ; the one thing that now occupied him was the thought that he must wait—that his deliverance lay in a stronger hand. The bullet that had whistled past his head had told him that he was but an insignificant mote, with which fate meant to amuse itself as long as it wished. But when it had lost its interest in him he would demand his rights and go to meet death. He had heard and understood ; he took it to mean that, before he had humbled himself sufficiently, there would be still more dregs for him to drink, and he felt grateful for every drop that was poured into the bitter cup which he must drain. So he answered gently—

“To me friendship and love have no longer any meaning. There is another tie that binds our fellow-countrymen more closely together.”

“You mean misfortune ?”

“Yes ; what else ?”

Westhuizen nodded again. He himself had thought the same. The two men, whom chance had thrown in each other’s way, looked at each other. Neither saw anything strange or unexpected in the other, and both were satisfied. They were two sinewy forms, both clad in rags—both vanquished men. One bowed himself willingly before the stress of fate ; as yet the other bore himself defiantly. His glowing eyes spoke of a hatred, the wild strength of which it was that sustained him. He himself knew that he hated as only lost souls can hate.

Side by side they went over to the spot where Westhuizen’s horse stood behind the boulders. It was an emaciated, badly groomed jade, with a much-worn saddle and bridle ; but it was still a horse, capable of carrying its master many a mile still before it failed.

"Where do you come from?" asked Westhuizen shortly.

Van der Nath described with his right hand a circle in the air. He could not tell.

Westhuizen laughed drily; he understood his comrade.

"And where do you mean to go?"

Van der Nath shook his head; for him this question was equally difficult to answer.

Westhuizen stretched out his hand and grasped Van der Nath's. They were of one mind, apparently; both, probably, had the same goal.

"And you?" asked Van der Nath after a pause.

"I?" said Westhuizen. "I think I come from home, but I hardly know. You see, friend, there came over me such a burning desire to see my wife and children. To see them, you hear?—it wasn't such an outrageous wish! I longed to stand upon the spot of ground I called my own, and so—yes, so I slipped away there. How long it is since I went there I can't remember now. I only remember that I went. And when I stared about me I thought I must be dreaming, or have lost my senses, for I saw nothing—nothing but a pile of charred logs. My home no longer existed. It had been burnt to the ground. My wife and children were not there either." His head fell forward, and in an unsteady voice he continued: "Are they alive or dead? I cannot tell; I know nothing. I only hope they are dead; then we shall meet the sooner." And he pointed upward to the grey, overcast sky, which threatened to burst asunder at any moment as if to sweep away with its waters the unstable hope of mankind. "I know nothing," repeated Westhuizen, his eyes flashing fire, "only that all the farms in the district have been burnt, and that all the men, women, and children who lived there have disappeared. Where are they? Who can tell me that?"

Van der Nath smiled at his vehemence. All that he had related belonged to the past; it had happened and could certainly not be altered now. He had gone through the same thing himself, and thousands of others had also been forced to tread the same path. There was but one thing to do—to bow oneself beneath the blow. He

himself thought it so natural that he did not think it worth while to say so to his friend ; he would get to know it and much else when his time came.

Westhuizen saw the smile, and clenched his fists in exasperation.

“I will be revenged !” he shouted.

Again Van der Nath smiled. Thousands of other men had said the same thing before, but it did not alter in the least that which must happen.

“Come ! they are gone !” shouted Westhuizen, giving free vent to his pain, and beating his chest with his hands ; “my children and my wife ! A tract of land a mile wide is laid waste ; the labour of several generations of men is trampled down in a few moments ; that which hundreds of men counted as their most precious possession is wiped out of existence as if it had never been. And I cannot tell why—I know nothing !”

Van der Nath searched his memory. There was something he had once heard—he could not tell when—that he would have liked to say just then. With an effort his brain obeyed his will, and he remembered. Quietly laying his hands on his companion’s shoulders, he said—

“Such things happen in every war. They have happened, and they will often happen again.”

Westhuizen was too much agitated to listen to him. He pushed him roughly away. Tearing open his ragged coat, he took from his pocket a much-soiled newspaper, which he opened out and began to read.

“Wait, wait !” he shouted, trembling with excitement ; “it is not all over with us yet ; it is not enough—it never will be enough !”

Only by a great effort did he succeed in holding his hands steady enough to discern the text before him. Van der Nath listened absently. To him everything seemed so unreal and far away. Why should he trouble himself with the expressions and opinions of others. The unimaginable had already happened, and it was just himself that it had befallen. There was now only one thing to wait and hope for—that the end might not be too far off.

But, in a voice that shook with resentment and suppressed suffering, Westhuizen read on.

The listener heard his voice only as a monotonous hum in the far distance. He distinguished the termination of each sentence uttered, and nodded in acquiescence. Yes, that was so. To burn their farms was necessary ; to hunt human beings like wild beasts was unavoidable ; to carry off women and children from the piece of land they called their home was an imperative duty, for they loved that piece of land above everything in the world, and showed it both by word and deed. All this Van der Nath knew before ; he knew the unpardonable audacity of which his people were guilty when they dared to love their country.

As he read, Westhuizen seemed to bite his words in pieces in his ferocity, and his voice rose to a hoarse shriek.

“Yes, yes,” muttered Van der Nath ; “yes, yes : ‘To destroy and kill are a means which has at length become a goal.’” Suddenly he started, and stopped the other in his reading. “It doesn’t say that !” he exclaimed anxiously.

“Yes ; here it is—that they do it out of mercy”—

“No, I say”—

“Yes, out of mercy ; so that it may come to an end the sooner.”

“Out of mercy !” repeated Van der Nath despairingly, almost as if he expected the heavens to fall upon them when they heard such words used in such a connection. A gust of wind seemed to carry his own words away over the plain. It whined plaintively among the boulders, murmured over the hillocks where the horses were feeding, and then vanished without leaving a trace. “This also !” he said, “this also !” And for the second time he repeated his commandant’s words : “Such things happen in every war.” “Yes, yes,” he continued, “they are right, these people. War, in its own way, is merciful—it often brings death.”

The light that had flashed in Westhuizen’s eye died away. His hands sank down, and he asked slowly—

“What is left for us now ?”

"There is nothing left us but to die, and if we can die worthily then all the better for us."

"But first we must have revenge."

Van der Nath looked at him in surprise. Had he, too, so far to go?

"What can it serve?" he asked wearily. "Brother, we must bow ourselves humbly and deeply—more deeply than we have ever imagined." As he spoke, Van der Nath's dreamy look seemed to become lost away out on the horizon, where the undulating line of the kopjes stood out in relief. His longing for death had never been stronger than at this moment, now that he felt that he wholly belonged to his little, abandoned people. But he resigned himself to live, without asking why he must, although death was the only thing that life had now in store for him. He abandoned himself to his overwhelming desire for rest, and his fancy conjured up magnificent pictures, the chief motive of which was his own destruction. To be allowed to sink into the all-embracing nothingness; to drop deeper and deeper into some vast abyss, unfathomable even by thought, and feel the eternal darkness and the great, peaceful silence closing upon his falling body,—that would be a reward for all his troubles, and for that he prayed. Gently, submissively, he smiled towards the unknown. Then he was seized by a sudden anguish. His eyes grew large and questioning; the human marionette again feared that fate might yet have a further struggle in store for him. "Have I not yet humbled myself enough?" he whispered. "Is even this too much to ask?"

Westhuizen crushed the paper together in his hands, and threw it from him.

"Mercy!" he cried. "Ha, ha, ha! Has that too become a lie?"

"Perhaps," answered Van der Nath. "Later, perhaps, we may learn how great . . . perhaps . . ." He went over to his horse, put the saddle to rights, and mounted. "Shall we ride on?" he asked.

Westhuizen muttered something inaudibly. He needed time to comprehend the change that had taken place in

his companion. But he was not the man to ponder over puzzles. He seized his rifle, leaped into the saddle, and shouted harshly—

“Yes, forward!—to revenge!”

“Forward! To the only certainty—to death!”

They rode towards the north in silence. Van der Nath now held his rifle ready before him, while his eyes scanned every little hillock that might conceal an ambush. Another time he would not neglect his opportunity; he would fulfil the conditions to the uttermost; he would take the lives of others so that he might be quit of his own. Never for a moment did it occur to him that he possessed the same power to free himself as his son Isaac; his weary thoughts had never travelled so far.

They had no need to deliberate what direction they should take. They followed a path both sides of which were strewed for miles with everything that a retreating and a pursuing army could leave behind them. This zigzag track, marked out by destruction, they followed, frightening away some sluggish carrion crows as they rode. But for these the path was silent and deserted.

They encountered a number of broken-down, half-charred waggons—a mere heap of blackened planks—and the men looked at each other significantly. De Vlies, they could see, had been hard pressed; he had set fire to a portion of his transport, which would have impeded him. Here was a cannon that had been blown to pieces, and a whole mass of boxes containing ammunition of great value had been destroyed. It had evidently been quick work. A number of dead oxen lay about the yard of a ruined farm. It had plainly been the scene of a serious rearguard action, and there . . . there were the graves. How many had fallen the riders did not ask—they could no longer count. Here and there the ground was still stained a dark red; not even the flood of rain had been able to wash away the ugly marks of war. At one point the foot of a dead man projected from the ground. The vultures, which had feasted their fill, sat a little way off, shrieking furiously at the men who had disturbed them. The two riders shook their

heads, for they understood: their friends had not even had time to bury their dead properly. There had been a wild chase for life or death; to be humane was out of the question—it meant only loss, and in war one could not be expected to risk it.

Half a mile farther on they found a dead horse lying on its side. A single glance told them that it had been a remarkably fine animal. It had not lain longer than a couple of days at most; its eyes had been plucked out of its head, probably while it was yet alive. It was easy to imagine its sad story. The horse, which had been transported across the seas, and had carried its master for long distances over a strange land, had been ridden to death. Its flanks were cut open by the spurs, and coagulated blood covered the wounds. When the comrade of so many adventures and dangers had been unable to hold out any longer, its owner, too much pressed to spend a shot from his revolver upon it, had let it lie. He had hastily mounted a fresh steed and hurried on, while the rapacious carrion crows began their work upon the other long before death had released it from its tortures.

The whole thing was all so clear and natural—so clear and natural in time of war. The rider had been a young officer, sent forward with some important despatch; he must go on at any cost, for upon his speed depended hundreds of lives. Upon that, too, depended his promotion. How could he waste sentiment upon an animal being tortured to death. Later on, perhaps, he would recall the trifling incident at mess, and tell of his break-neck ride just before the battle of —, mentioning regretfully the sum which his fine steed had cost him. A name, a sum of money, a shrug of the shoulders—that would probably be the end of the matter.

The wretched torture to which animals are subjected in consequence of war also confronted the two men about a mile farther on in the carcasses of a dozen oxen that had fallen and had been thrashed to death. They had done what they could; they had dragged a waggon of ammunition half-way up a steep incline, but could manage no more.

Furious hands had torn the flesh from their bleeding necks ; curses and kicks had rained down upon the poor creatures as they sank on their knees with their tongues hanging out. Other animals had been brought forward to take their place, and the worn-out brutes had been left behind to die of hunger and thirst. There they lay, living and dead together, entangled in the traces, rising only to fall again, trampling on each other, butting and bellowing, spending their last strength in destroying each other.

But the human beings who had caused all this had hurried on to battle, where honour called them.

The two horsemen turned away from the loathsome sight, and rode on in the track marked out for them by the war. Now and then they stopped to breathe their horses, although the feelings that impelled them onward did not permit them to think of fatigue. And so they pursued the endless path, strewn everywhere with the hideous wreckage and offal of an army.

At one point an ambulance had halted for a time. The ground was saturated with blood ; tufts of wadding and strips of bandages lay about. A surgical case containing several instruments had been forgotten ; a broken-legged camp-stool, a stretcher, which bore marks of having served for an operation, a broken eye-glass, and several other articles which the rain had rusted, had all been trampled into the ground. Here also the same delirious haste had reigned ; everything seemed to have been only half done ; some had scarcely begun to have their wounds dressed, when the wild chase had carried all onward again in its wild sweep.

At another point a great flock of carrion crows had taken up their position to gorge and fatten themselves. The two men rode hastily past.

At a farm, the walls of which still stood although the roof had been blown off, they found a woman lying in bed dead. Among the remnants of broken furniture that lay about, in the smashed windows and the brutal disorder that reigned throughout the house, they read a tragedy so dark and gruesome that they paled before it.

Van der Nath was the first to recover himself. With an air of severity and far-seeing strength he repeated—

“This happens in every war.” To him this summed up all that was to be said. And, with that immovable calm which he had exhibited all along, he added: “You see, brother, we human beings can never humble ourselves sufficiently.”

“Yes, but there is a limit,” muttered Westhuizen.

“But where? And who can see it?”

They bore the dead woman in silence from the house and buried her, Westhuizen offering up a prayer that sounded like an indictment. Another of the war’s many crimes was hidden.

They mounted their horses and rode on once more. Everywhere war’s destroying wave had swept over the unhappy land, expelling all semblance of life and wiping out every trace of human industry. They could see that they were approaching nearer to the fighting armies; wherever they turned they could see only the results of war peering forth from the darkness.

Suddenly Westhuizen halted. Breathing heavily he raised his clenched hand to heaven, and shouted vehemently—

“May the men be cursed who have brought all this upon man, created in God’s own image!”

The words flew out over the plain, rebounding from hillock to hillock, and out of the darkness came back a hollow echo—

“God’s own image . . . !”

The echo roused Van der Nath from the confused dreams in which his mind was wandering. What purpose, thought he, with a smile, could anger and curses serve? Their prayers availed nothing; their cries of agony were lost in the air unheard. All that his companion and thousands of others achieved by such actions was the setting in motion of certain air waves. How many wailing cries from dumb animals, from worn-out men, from terror-stricken women and children, had gone forth in the same way without awakening so much as an

echo? He smiled again—at himself, at his companion, at everything. Was one's whole life worth even a curse? And even if it were, what purpose could it serve?

“There is war in the land!” he said slowly, and almost without thinking he again repeated the words which seemed to have grown fast to his tongue—“Such things happen in every war.”

Westhuizen continued growling like an angry dog.

“May they be cursed, I say!” he hissed.

Van der Nath shrugged his shoulders. Without knowing how he recalled a conversation with du Wallon beside the camp fire. “Politics,” that elegant commandant had observed, “are all nonsense when one is not the strongest.” Well, it might be so; Van der Nath considered himself too unlearned to have an opinion about such things. But did religion and love of humanity mean nothing? He had believed in the words of his Bible, and he had heard it said that the enemy too prided themselves upon being Christians. Was it really possible that religion could mean nothing more? “No!” he said quietly but energetically. He had believed, and he tried still to believe, but . . . These men, who had bereaved him and so many others, had robbed him of the drowning man's straw, his faith. He had only to look around to see it; not even the darkness could hide the proofs of it. Instead of love, the motive power of the world, these men had set up their reckless selfishness, without even asking themselves how it affected others. And they were on their way to succeed. Yes, it was they who would be in the right, and those who were childish enough to believe would go to the wall. Well, there was only one thing he longed for, and, moreover, it was legitimate, for this war, like all others, had taught one lesson—that human life was without value. He shuddered and wrapped his coat tighter about him. It seemed to him that a dying breath of wind wafted an echo, at once plaintive and menacing, from the mountains—

“ . . . Gods own image! . . .”

It was night, and the two men crept behind a rock to shelter themselves from the wind. When a faint gleam of

light announced the approaching day they arose from their damp bed, saddled their horses and rode on. They no longer noticed the traces of war that strewed their way; they had become accustomed to the sight of burnt farms, rotting corpses, and accumulations of rubbish. There were now signs that they were not far from the army; their instinct of self-preservation awoke, and they were on the alert against sudden surprise. Something in the air seemed to warn them that something was about to happen, and even Van der Nath was now entirely roused from his lethargy.

Their horses had had a good rest, and started off at a brisk trot of their own accord. They soon arrived at the top of a ridge from which they knew they would command a wide view over the district. Here the sight that met their eyes sent the blood coursing swiftly through their veins. Beneath, away to the north, stretched an immense plain bounded by two high hills, and these were swarming with life. "Our people!" shouted Westhuizen. And he was about to spur his horse to a sharp gallop, when Van der Nath restrained him, and pointed without a word to the west.

Not more than four miles away came another army over the same ridge on which they had halted. The artillery came rattling up the western slope, and dashed on to the east. Mounted infantry galloped with loosened rein in the same direction, while below a regiment of Lancers were preparing for the attack. The point of vantage of Van der Nath and his companion was such that nothing escaped them. The attacking force, which was nearest them, displayed extraordinary activity. Detachments on horseback and on foot rushed down the slope, and on reaching the plain formed into firing lines which advanced through the grass in double quick time towards the kopjes. A battery took up its position and discharged some shells, but as the range was still too great its fire was discontinued, and the battery went on again. Half-way out upon the plain it met with an unexpected obstruction. The men ran about like ants whose hill is in danger; in a few moments the

animals were unbuckled, and the men themselves seized hold of the wheels of the carriages. One after another the guns rolled down a steep hill, and disappeared before the two men's eyes.

"There is a stream down there," said Westhuizen; "there is sure to be a strong current there just now," he added scornfully.

Van der Nath nodded. He had been pondering; he seemed to recognise the spot, and was searching his memory. Yes, of course, he was not mistaken—it was the same place where, not so long before, he had taken up his position in the kraal at the back of Koopman's deserted farm. The hollow in which the guns had disappeared was the same slit in which one of the enemy's battalions had lain concealed in order to entice him into a trap. Then his troop had been saved by a lucky chance, and now the hill had done de Vlies good service by preventing the advance of his enemy. He had failed to recognise the spot at once because on the former occasion he had approached the karoo from the south; now he approached from almost the opposite direction, and was several miles to the west. His memory came to his help; he saw almost by instinct what had happened, and he gave a nod of satisfaction. The Boer rearguard had swung into the pass, while the English were striving to overcome the difficulty unexpectedly placed in their way by the spruit. It was clear that the English, having lost sight of their mobile enemy, had for some days been rushing forward in the direction they had last been seen to take. Finding that the Boers had taken a new direction, they had followed, exerting themselves to the utmost to make up for lost time. And now that they had overtaken them they directed their attack upon the retiring enemy's flank.

If all went as the pursuers had calculated the engagement would prove a crushing blow for the Boers. But de Vlies's caution did not desert him. His rearguard had escaped attack; its last ranks had got off in good order between the kopjes. But for the spruit one of the usual exasperating rearguard fights would no doubt have taken

place. Now de Vlies could count upon several hours' start.

"Now is our time to overtake them," said Westhuizen, when he had seen the last Boer disappear into the pass in good time.

Without a word Van der Nath turned his horse's head to the west, and set off at a sharp pace. What he had seen had restored his buoyancy, and he knew at once what they must do. They must make their way round the English force, perhaps wasting half a day in doing so; but two men by themselves could move thrice as quickly as an army on the march, and unless unforeseen difficulties should oppose them they might count upon reaching their friends in the afternoon. If they rode westwards they would have to cross the enemy's marching column, which probably extended a considerable distance. The troops which they had seen on the karoo were merely the van of a greater force which was also marching in the same direction, in order to continue their way to the north later, when it should be clear to which quarter de Vlies would retire.

On reaching the spruit Van der Nath and Westhuizen discovered a ford, and were soon on the other side. They rode cautiously over the karoo and, making a circuit to the north, which brought them very close to the English gunners, several of whom were up to their shoulders in the water as they worked at the guns, they once more turned to the right and made their way across to Koopman's farm, so that they might await a chance to pass the enemy under the shelter of the kraal. Although they had made good use of their time it was now nearly noon. As they could not tell what dangers might await them they decided that it would be well to spare their horses' strength and give them an hour's rest.

While Westhuizen stayed in the yard Van der Nath went up into the garret to view the position. Three of the guns had been got across the stream, and the men were now busy with the horses. Two companies of infantry had also reached the other bank, and were drawn up ready to

advance, while a force of cavalry slowly approached the pass with the intention of finding out if it was occupied. Away to the west dark lines could be seen marching over the plain ; but instead of uniting with the vanguard at the stream, they turned off in another direction. When Van der Nath had followed their movements for a while he realised that de Vlies could not by any means consider himself safe. The advancing column, though at that distance it seemed to move at a snail's pace, was in reality making rapidly for a point far to the north of the pass, and if this should be occupied by de Vlies's force it must, in a few hours' time, find itself surrounded and hedged in.

The spectator in the garret of the deserted house could not but admire the tactics of the enemy's general. When he saw his plans thwarted by the Boers he had immediately another ready. Instead of storming forward blindly, he ordered a new objective for the march. Had Van der Nath studied mathematics he would hardly have wondered at what he saw. The problem involved was quite a simple one, but the admirable quickness with which the general solved it caused him to turn pale. The vanguard had orders to force the pass, and meanwhile the head column marched northwards to the west of the kopjes, which shortened the way by one-half. They were the two arms of the giant's scissors, which were being placed in position and would soon clench together and clip the little army of de Vlies into two pieces.

The shots that had already been fired were but a challenge of which the Boers had been too prudent to take any notice. Their opponents were outnumbered, but every moment was bringing them reinforcements. Their one aim was to make good their retreat. Van der Nath saw that if they occupied the pass, as he did not doubt they would, they would be exposed to very great danger, as the enemy would be able to attack the kopje from the north.

Suddenly fire was opened from the distant boulders, and the body of Lancers, who had come within range, at once spread themselves out over the plain. This was the answer to Van der Nath's question, and he hurried down

from the garret. He knew how great a temptation it would be for the Boers to defend their excellent position, and if they did their destruction was certain. It was evidently the English plan to keep them fast within the pass. Entering the yard where Westhuizen sat, he sprang into his saddle and shouted the one word—

“Come !”

Without asking any explanation Westhuizen also mounted, dug his spurs into the animal’s flanks and followed. They rode furiously to the north-west. When Westhuizen had overtaken Van der Nath he looked at him questioningly.

“Over there !” panted the latter, pointing to the east of the kopjes. “Later—when we are past—to the left. Our people—are in the pass ;—the rooneks will soon—be behind them.”

“Behind them ?”

Van der Nath nodded, giving his horse a pat with his open hand.

Westhuizen understood, and both men urged their horses to greater exertions. Van der Nath felt some pangs of conscience as he thought of the horse that had been ridden to death, beside whose carcass they had stood the day before. He dismissed these unpleasant thoughts, muttering between his teeth—

“It is necessary—there is no help for it !”

In these few words he expressed the characteristics of the war : the most abhorrent acts of cruelty were necessary—there was no help for them. It had to be done, and there was an end of it. But it cut him to the quick to be obliged to ill-treat his faithful friend like this. So much depended on their reaching the goal in time, and while he gently stroked his horse’s neck with one hand he tore its sides with his spurs till the blood came. There was no help for it !

After an hour’s hard ride the two men reached the kopje, the eastern side of which they had followed as closely as possible. Rocks lay everywhere around ; there was no path, and the horses began to stumble and halt. Presently, however, they came out upon a flat field over which they were again able to ride at full gallop.

Westhuizen gave a shout of joy as he discovered that they were only a short distance from the northern entrance of the pass. Van der Nath collected his thoughts, and once more felt himself the field-cornet, upon whose judgment depended the welfare of many. He stopped for a moment in order to take his bearings.

Before him, to the left, rose the craggy slope of the kopje against the sky. In the distance his practised ear could detect the scarcely audible sound of gunfire. To the right lay the even slope of a fresh plain. As he looked in that direction he started. Some miles distant there moved a great irregular mass of human beings, hastening northwards in wild confusion towards the hills which could be seen away on the horizon. It was de Vlies's army, fleeing from a superior force. Van der Nath shaded his eyes with his hand, and strained them to the utmost. Then he gave a deep sigh of relief: fortunately they seemed to be in good time. He ordered Westhuizen to ride forward and give the signal as soon as the enemy should show himself on the other side. He himself entered the pass.

"Halt!—Who's there?" called a voice.

Van der Nath waved his hand. It was pure Cape Dutch that he had heard, and although the tone was unfriendly the words sounded pleasant to his ears.

"A good friend!" he shouted, glad to find himself among his countrymen at last;—"a good friend!"

A dirty unkempt man rose up from behind some stones and came towards him. He stopped suddenly, and exclaimed in astonishment—

"The field-cornet!"

"What? Is it you, Joseph Flick?"

The man stretched out his hand—a hard dirty hand—and Van der Nath seized it as gently and tenderly as if he were handling some rare treasure. He was with his own people again, and the past was forgotten—for a time. He bent down and asked young Flick a question.

"We are the rearguard," was the answer. And when Van der Nath betrayed surprise at finding him so far

behind his comrades the young man held up his left arm, which was bandaged with a bloodstained rag.

“Wounded,” he answered briefly.

“But you are able to ride?”

“It is not a question here of what one is able to do, or what one will do. It is only a case of standing or falling.”

The bitter tone and the impetuous gesture that accompanied the words told more than the questioner wished to know. He ordered Flick to go after de Vlies and inform him of the surrounding movement of the English. He himself rode farther into the pass. The shots that fell from time to time were a warning of an impending attack, and this strengthened his view of the enemy's intentions. He urged on his horse, and at length he reached a spot where, from the shelter of the corner of a rock, he could see the Dornenburg commando, greatly diminished in numbers, lying among the boulders. As he looked at his friends he sorrowfully shook his head. There were scarcely forty men left. But it was not a time for such reflections, and with the old signal which they all knew so well he called them to him. They gathered round, surprised to see their field-cornet again so unexpectedly. He at once explained the position to them, and gave orders for retreat. There was much else that he would have liked to do ; the men's eyes implored him for news of relatives and neighbours left at home ; but all that must wait, for time, the irrecoverable, was speeding from them.

“Well, Abraham, so you have come back after all !” said old Jan van Gracht, giving him a playful dig in the ribs. He was not sorry to be released from the responsibility of command, and he was plainly pleased to see the field-cornet again.

Jan was the only one of the band who was still his old self, although a little lankier and stiffer. But the others ? When each had discharged his rifle for the last time and had mounted his horse Van der Nath scanned them closely one after another, and as he did so the anxiety that had possessed him on entering the pass was increased.

They were a band of strong, hardy, sunburnt men,

mounted on lean, shaggy horses, and all were clothed in rags and covered with dirt. Their movements were not so sure as their leader could have wished. It was, indeed, a strange company. They were men who bore imprinted on their dark faces the anguish of many defeats ; men without hope or expectation of future victories. Yet there was a certain grandeur about them. The furrowed features of the younger men and the clouded brows of their elders told in mute language a strange story. They were the heroes of a tragedy in the world's history, for the last act of which the curtain had gone up. They had risen with the intensity of the tragedy, and their rags told more than any words could tell. They did not hesitate to acknowledge their defeat ; they knew what awaited them in the end—perhaps at the nearest stone-heap. But although they knew it, they had yet the courage to speak the truth aloud without flinching. They challenged fate defiantly and laughed scornfully at its blows. They meant to stand or fall with their cause like one man. They no longer feared ; and if they drew back now it was only because they expected an opportunity to strike hard and to drag down many others with them in their fall.

They rode out of the pass. At a distance Westhuizen was waiting, signalling to them that they must hurry. They dashed at full gallop over the plain, the heights to the west concealing the enemy for the time being. Two hours' ride brought them up with the stragglers of the retiring columns, who comprised a few wounded, a number of exhausted horsemen, the drivers of a couple of waggons, and a score of men on foot.

The Dornenburg commando followed its leader in his race after de Vlies. Van der Nath seemed to see defeat lurking behind the western heights ; the air seemed laden with menace, and a torturing anxiety seized hold of him. He sought to persuade himself that all would be changed if only he could reach the commandant, hear his voice and press his hand. And then he had his mission to fulfil, for now he felt assured that he had been spared in order to die that day. Thus his fate would be fulfilled, and he felt

glad, as a man always is when he fancies that he stands nearer that for which he has longed through many weary days and nights.

The horsemen passed the last of the fugitives, waved greetings to about a hundred Boer soldiers in the distance who were marching north in good order, and cut their way through a long train of waggons that were going in the same direction.

“The commandant?” shouted Van der Nath interrogatively to some men who had halted by a heap of stones and were closely scanning the plain behind them.

One of the men pointed to the right, and in that direction they made their way.

In the midst of the plain was a deep drift, and thither the living stream of men had instinctively turned. Here they seethed in a confused and noisy mass, and into it Van der Nath and his men sought to find a way. But so many were the obstacles that they encountered that they were at length obliged to come to a standstill before a wall of waggons, which in the race from danger had got stuck at one of the narrowest parts of the road.

“It’s of no use!” shouted Westhuizen angrily; “we must get out of this!”

There was nothing else to be done, and Van der Nath reluctantly ordered his men to retire as best they could. Silently and sadly they obeyed, making their horses clamber up the steep sides of the rift. They then assembled at the top of the hill, and awaited that which was to happen.

Van der Nath glanced down darkly at the confusion beneath him. It was no longer a retreat but a wild flight in which everything had got mixed. The men thrashed their panting horses unceasingly, and threatened each other with the sjambok. Curses filled the air. The oxen bellowed, the horses neighed and whinnied, the clamour grew worse and worse; one of the waggons was overturned, making confusion worse confounded. It spread to the flanks and the first lines of the rearguard. No one knew anything certain; all thought that the worst was to be feared. Wherever one looked there was the same scene of

senseless disorder, the same reckless anxiety to reach the mountains where safety lay—at least for the time.

A big gun, which had proved too much for the horses to drag up the bank, went rolling down into the crowd below, making a lane through the ranks of the fugitives. Behind it the rushing stream united again; women and children were trampled down, and were left bleeding and groaning by the way; the waggons rattled, mingling with the tramp of the horses and the screams of the fugitives, the whole constituting a stupefying symphony that struck the spectators on the hill with terror.

“Ah,” said Jan van Gracht, in answer to a questioning look from Van der Nath, “we have been in worse straits even than this. If only the commandant were here, he would get them to be quiet and do their best.” He polished his spectacles with a dirty cloth, set them on his nose, and added reassuringly: “It looks bad enough, certainly; but the rooneks are a good bit off yet, and they will take care not to come too near our guns. We have already singed their eyebrows too often.” And he gave a pleased chuckle at the thought of some recent engagements.

“In war everything is possible,” muttered Van der Nath, looking towards the west. No, there was no sign of anything there yet. He clasped his hands together and prayed, silently and fervently: “Time, O Lord! Give us time! . . . time! Let the sun stand still, as long ago! Spare the women and children from the shells! Time, O Lord! . . . a few minutes—seconds!”

Old Jan saw his gesture, and in his rough, downright way he uncovered his head to pray also.

“Yes,” he said when he had finished, “if I am not mistaken the guns will have their say before nightfall. And you needn’t be uneasy, Abraham; the whole force will soon be in safety among the mountains. De Vlies isn’t the man to let himself be caught up by a lot of clod-hopping rooneks.”

“Yes, but those down there, Oom Jan,—those down there.” And he pointed with his trembling hand down into the ravine, where the same confusion still prevailed.

"H'mph! Those down there! They don't belong to the army; they will be a good riddance! . . . Well, don't be angry, Abraham; of course it is pretty hard on the poor creatures, I know. Confound him! if there isn't a rascal of a Kaffir hitting a white man with the handle of his whip! Well, one doesn't get soft-hearted in war, and this is a war and no mistake. Abraham, isn't it wonderful that there should be so many people in the world? We have shot down many thousands of them—thousands of men who might have been of great use if they had been allowed to live. Their field-hospitals are chock-full from end to end; the thousands in them too were intended for something better. Can anyone make out what it is all for?"

Van der Nath shrugged his shoulders at the old man's talk, but Jan had got himself well started.

"They want to make us Englishmen, people said once," he continued; "but in that case they have gone about it in the wrong way. Well, well; we must just hold out and shoot down another thousand. Ha, ha! war is a wicked thing, and yet they boast of their great civilisation and all that sort of thing; but when they behave in this fashion no one can really blame us for holding out. You will see, Abraham, that all will go well in the end, and"—he raised his voice so that it sounded high above the din below—"those who are left after all this will thank and praise the Lord for His great mercy in time of trial."

"Oom, do you think—do you really think . . .?"

Old Jan drew himself up in his saddle with an air of dignity, and said severely—

"To think anything else is to doubt God's righteousness, Abraham. There are many small nations in the world, and the Lord holds His mighty hand over them all. A nation's existence does not depend upon its possession of the best weapons."

The sound of hoofs was heard behind them. A considerable troop had halted by the hill, and a single rider came dashing up to them.

"Cornet van Gracht!" shouted a sharp commanding

voice, "what does this mean? Why have you left your post without my permission?"

"Commandant, I . . . Van der Nath is here."

"Abraham!" And de Vlies reined in his horse with a violent jerk, and stretched out his hand. "Welcome back; here we need every arm."

Van der Nath returned his greeting. Then he looked with astonishment at the man before him. Of the fanatic who had once predicted disaster there was now no trace. The ragged clothes were the same, and a deep wrinkle had formed between the bushy eyebrows. But his movements were energetic, his voice as hard as metal, his words concise and without an unnecessary syllable. De Vlies had become quite another man. While everything about him was tumbling and tottering to pieces he had found himself and grown in proportion to the danger. Defeats only redoubled his strength; reverses increased his ingenuity past belief; every time that he was checked he arose more formidable than before.

"There is no time for talking now," he said to Van der Nath; "if neither of us falls we shall have time enough later." As he spoke he cast a hasty glance over the plain. He saw that the picked men of his little army had reached the hills towards the north, and a calm smile of satisfaction played about his tightly pressed lips. It vanished, however, and gave place to an expression of pain when he turned to the scene of confusion below. His face grew dark as he scanned the noisy mass that streamed onward through the ravine. With such a medley between him and the enemy, to think of a successful defence was out of the question. There was nothing for it but to flee as fast as the legs of horses and men could move.

Suddenly a cry of anguish came from the last stragglers, and was taken up by those in front.

The head of the enemy's column had appeared on the summit of the south-west heights, and was now marching quickly over the plain. There was still a distance of several miles to be covered before they could open an effective fire, but for the fugitives to maintain this distance would be

impossible. The English had discerned the confusion through their field-glasses, and were hastening their advance. Fresh detachments appeared constantly upon the ridge, and from the pass behind came a long line of mounted infantry, while a regiment of cavalry dashed northwards in order to get past the rearguard in the pass, and direct their attack against the flank of the retiring force.

“Abraham!” exclaimed de Vlies, bringing his hand down on Van der Nath’s shoulder, “I need you!” Abraham was about to answer, but the commandant showed by a sign that he could not listen then. “You will occupy the kopje over there with”—he glanced at the forty men in rags, and smiled sadly—“with the Dornenburgers.” He pointed to a little isolated kopje on the plain, about two miles forward of the northern range of hills. “There you must remain; the position is splendid, and if it is defended as—as it must be defended, you can hold out a couple of hours. They are tired too; they can’t send forward more than a few men at a time. Westhuizen, you can join Van der Nath; there will be an attack from more sides than one, and you will have to keep your eyes open. I will see that a good force covers you in the rear; but, whatever happens, you must not abandon the kopje.”

Van der Nath shook the commandant by the hand. He understood that the situation was hopeless, that he and his forty ragged soldiers were to be sacrificed to break the force of the first attack. Deliverance was at hand, the end was near, and he was glad of it.

But de Vlies spoke on, quickly and sternly, like a chief who does not concern himself about the sacrifices of his subordinates if only his end is attained.

“Two guns will be placed in the pass; they will support you, and—and I rely upon you, Abraham, the enemy must not advance beyond your position.” His voice became low and thick. “I need at least six hours to save what can be saved. You must find me time, my friend—time, time! A salute from the kopje will astonish the enemy, and give them something to think about. They will smell a trap, and attack you after wasting some hours in reconnoitring;

and I shall have time to make good my position. It will take them some time yet to reach us, but when they do you must obtain me breathing space—the longer the better. Cornet Van der Nath, Cornet Westhuizen, men of Dornenburg, I rely upon your devotion!"

A murmur of acquiescence ran through the ranks; the forty men drew themselves up, and some of them began to load. Jan van Gracht raised his hoarse voice, and said calmly—

"Well, I suppose we shan't fare worse this time than before. We rely upon you, commandant; and if only you can protect us in the rear, not one of us will give way."

De Vlies nodded to the old man, shook Van der Nath by the hand, and said solemnly—

"Farewell!"

The word seemed to cost him a great effort; but he was accustomed to his friends being engulfed, one after another, in the whirlpool of war. He repressed his emotion, and gave a military salute.

"Thank you!" said Van der Nath. "You have given me what I longed for."

"You, too?" muttered de Vlies sorrowfully. "You are lucky, Abraham, for you will not see the end of all this."

Then, remembering that the eyes of thousands were upon him, and that it was his duty to keep up their courage, he drew himself up, and galloped off, followed by the troop that had awaited him at the foot of the hill.

The forty men whose mission it was to ward off the first danger rode at a great pace over the kopjes, while beneath the stream of fugitives flowed on. In the hopeless confusion trifling obstacles, which at other times would have been surmounted in a few moments, now occasioned long delays. A woman, surrounded by several children, sat on the top of a lumbering four-wheeled waggon loaded with furniture and household goods, while her husband thrashed the bleeding sides of the oxen to make them move faster. Behind came a white-haired old man on a small cart drawn by a stiff-legged horse, which he urged on by kicking its flanks with his heavy boots, shouting and whipping it constantly. The animal made a last fruitless effort, and sank

down unable to stir. For a few moments the old man stared about him blankly ; then, when he had recovered his wits, he took his rifle from the cart, placed his crying grandchildren in his arms, and strode on, leaving all his own and his son's possessions behind him. In a narrow, rickety carriage, that rocked about like a ship at sea, sat a middle-aged woman with a dozen wailing children, who held fast to her skirts. The smallest, hardly a year old, lay at her breast. A wounded man, the father, walked along beside them, weary and downcast, holding on to the carriage, which without him was too heavily laden. When his wife called out a word of encouragement to him he tried to smile, but the smile was half idiotic and meaningless. And so he walked on, his pain and fever causing everything about him to appear to him through a mist.

And wherever one looked the same kind of thing was to be seen. The cries of women and children rose like a hideous pæan to the god of war ; and as a background to all this was the despair of the men as they saw the distance between them and their friends increase, while every moment the enemy came nearer and nearer.

Everywhere it was the same. A waggon, trying to make its way up the bank and so out of the throng, slipped back again and stuck fast. As there was nothing to be done with it, a man jumped down from the waggon and ran off ; but he left behind a woman with a little child in her arms, who uttered the most piteous cries for help. All human ties were broken ; fathers left their children to the mercy of chance ; husbands were separated from their wives. The instinct of self-preservation stifled every manifestation of humanity. To help anyone else was a madness of which no one was guilty. It was everyone for himself.

The English had succeeded in getting forward a couple of guns with which they tried to open fire. The sound was like an electric shock to the rearguard which de Vlies had left as cover for the fugitives. The first shell had fallen far short, but it was only natural to expect that the next would be better placed. So the hundred men who formed the guard rode along the sides of the ravine,

intending to leave the wretched people to their fate. They had done everything in their power, but to expose themselves to no purpose to the enemy's shells was too great a trial for their courage.

After they had retreated to the accompaniment of curses, shrieks, and prayers, and the regular boom of the distant guns, the Dornenburg men were the nearest Boer force to the enemy. They who had trodden the long *Via Dolorosa* of war looked down aghast into the terrible hollow. But a shell came and ploughed up the earth dangerously near to them, and they set themselves in motion in order to take up the position that had been allotted to them.

They had ridden only a few paces when Westhuizen, as if by some irresistible impulse, stood up in his stirrups to scan once again the confusion below. Suddenly he turned pale and half unconsciously pressed his hand to his heart. Amid the throng of people and animals who jostled one another there waved a tiny, delicate hand, and a child's voice cried plaintively—

“Father!—Father!”

Despite its weakness the little mouth that uttered the cry had succeeded in making it pierce the air so that the words were heard, above all the din and clangour, by the ears they were intended for.

Westhuizen heard, and something—he could not have said what—told him that the cry concerned him. He looked, and saw a little girl sitting on a cart, waving her hand.

“Ruth!—my daughter!”

The cry came irresistibly from his lips. He had bemoaned his wife as dead, and had accustomed himself to believe that the four little ones who had called him father had followed her into the unknown. And here, thirty paces off, was the youngest, alive and calling him towards her. Without a thought of anything but the little hand raised above the surging crowd he turned his horse and rode down the steep slope. Impelled by the overpowering desire to ask one simple question, he forced his way through the moving mass.

"Your mother—the others?" he cried, and he mentioned the children by name. "O Ruth, my brave little girl!—keep up! don't let them push you over! Do you hear, Ruth—hold on tight!"

The child swayed and fell.

"Ruth—Ruth!"

Angry words were hurled at him, threatening hands were raised at him, but he saw nothing but the feeble hand, and heard nothing but the heart-rending cry—

"Father, father!—Help me!"

His horse got its legs entangled in some trailing ropes, and he was thrown to the ground. He was trampled upon by hard feet, and received many blows and kicks. When at last he got up the blood was streaming down his face from a wound in the forehead. The little hand was gone; it had vanished in the surge.

Had he found his child only to lose her again? He was furious at the obstacles that impeded his progress. He knocked down one man who would not get out of his way quickly enough, and, roaring like a madman, he rushed in the direction in which he had last seen the little hand.

"Ruth! Ruth!" he cried. "Where is mother and the others?"

Suddenly there was a deafening noise not ten paces off. Something terrible had happened. The earth was torn up; gravel and sand were hurled up into the air and then rained down again. At a certain spot there was a hissing and cracking, and a hail of projectiles was scattered all around, while a stifling smoke arose, enveloping everything in its impenetrable veil. Soon Westhuizen saw, as through a fog, how a waggon was shattered into splinters; he noticed a wheel whirling round high up in the air, and fancied that something flaccid, shapeless, like a human limb, kept it company, to fall presently with a heavy thud. And in a wide circle round about the living and the dead were swept away and annihilated. All this happened in the fraction of a second; then everything was as before, but strangely silent and still. Westhuizen had sunk down on his knees. All at once he felt so weak and exhausted that he could

scarcely move a finger. With a feeble movement he put his hand to his side ; in spite of his exhaustion he felt impelled to do so. A sort of sticky moisture adhered to his hands. A smile of uncertainty flitted over his face. What was this . . . What—? He tried to think, exerting his brain to the utmost.

“The shell !” he said aloud. “I am wounded”—

But immediately he remembered his child. He rose, staggered a few paces, swayed and fell ; then he rose, and fell again. All became dark before his eyes ; first the landscape was blotted out, the outlines of the hills grew blurred and uncertain, the surface of the earth resembled a leaden sky ; then the whole world seemed to sink away, and he was left behind, alone, to be torn by untold agonies. He lay slowly down ; he wanted to sleep, to forget. Something was trampling upon his outstretched limbs . . . A fearful shudder went through him ; he drew his knees up to his chin, straightened himself out again, and rolled over several times while the red life-blood flowed from his rent side. Some inarticulate sounds came from his lips. The pain forced him to open his eyes, and then memory awoke again. He looked about him ; his eyes rested upon a rolled-up bundle that lay beside him. He stretched out his hand towards it.

“Ruth !—Ruth !” he whispered hoarsely, dragging the little bundle to him, and pressing his pale lips to what he imagined to be his own child’s cheek. “Ah, how cold !” An icy shudder shook him from head to foot ; convulsions seized his trembling limbs, and that which a few moments before had been a human being full of strength and warm blood lay there uttering incoherent words, and pressing a lifeless object to his breast. Then came death, softly and ingratiatingly, upon the scene, and laid his bony hand upon his burning forehead ; and Westhuizen’s soul forsook its mortal dwelling to meet once more the child of which the war had bereft him.

The Dornenburg men had halted when Westhuizen rode away from them. They beheld his fate, and their clenched fists and flashing eyes showed the impression it made upon them.

"Look—look! Now they kill even women and children!" shouted Van der Nath as the shell burst amid the fugitives.

"From the position of the guns they cannot see down into the ravine," said a voice beside him. "They don't know we have women and children with us."

Van der Nath turned round to rebuke the speaker, and encountered the tearful eyes of the old missionary. He had forgotten him, as he had forgotten so much else; but he was not surprised to meet him. Nothing now was capable of surprising him.

He shrugged his shoulders; he would not argue with the old man. At the thought of the influence which the minister had once exercised over him he laughed harshly, almost maliciously, and a new idea entered his mind. To take the old man with him, force him to witness the fight that was imminent, see the finish, and hear from his own lips an admission that all that they both believed, that all that the whole world longed for, was but a foolish chimera—that would amuse him. Then he looked more closely at the thin, bent form. He bore the same rags, the same dirt, as all the others; but the eyes! . . . What great unfathomable eyes, full of bitter sadness and unutterable pain. Here was one who had brooded until he was sick at soul, one who had bowed himself, and was now not far from relinquishing his hold on life. Van der Nath had not the heart to realise his idea; the malicious thought was silently buried and forgotten. He shrugged his shoulders again. In the face of such facts what purpose could talking serve. He could not, however, refrain from asking one question—

"Do you think, then, that the enemy would stop their fire if they knew who were down there?"

A pained look of astonishment appeared in the old man's childlike eyes. He shuddered at Van der Nath's hard tones. He knew that once, at least, he had brought this man into the way he should go. And now he had come back more hardened than before, and just as revengeful as all the others. And down there—cries of distress, suffering, and death. He looked away; he feared for the men beside him; he stood helpless before the evil destiny that lay in wait everywhere.

He was silent, seeking some excuse, some explanation ; and it was not to be found.

“There again !” exclaimed the field-cornet, as another shell, aimed with admirable precision, fell close behind the fugitives. “There again !”

“God in heaven !—What is this ?” stammered the old man, raising his clasped hands.

“It is blasphemy, but men seek an excuse and call it war !”

“Yes, yes,” said the old man sadly ; “it is blasphemy against Thee, O God, against the life given us to do good with—blasphemy against everything in heaven and on earth.”

“Do you follow it all, pastor ? This is only the beginning of the end, and the end is far off yet.”

“No, no ; I will not see more. I am weary—weary to death !” And he closed his eyes so that he should not see.

Van der Nath laid his right hand on his arm.

“Come !” he said harshly. “At least you cannot remain here. Those lines over there are soldiers ; in half an hour they will have advanced sufficiently to sweep away everything that is here.”

“Do you think . . . ?” The pastor opened his eyes and looked over the plain as if animated by some faint hope. He seemed to have an idea of remaining.

“They will shoot you down ; they can’t distinguish anybody at that distance. So don’t be obstinate !” Van der Nath grew suddenly exasperated without knowing why, and seized the reins of the missionary’s horse. “Yes, look there !” he exclaimed ; “look your fill, old man !” But the missionary only looked at him.

“And your promise, Abraham ?” he asked sorrowfully.

Van der Nath’s features contracted convulsively, as if someone had probed a half-healed wound. Then he shrugged his shoulders and answered—

“Did I know what I was doing when I gave it ? Besides, Abraham Van der Nath is dead. His heart broke one night long ago, very long ago. He no longer exists. Do not look at me so reproachfully ; there is no help for it. And now, come along ! Come and see !”

CHAPTER V

DE MORTUIS

HALF an hour's ride brought the troop to the kopje, and in accordance with their orders the men approached the position from the north. Leaving their horses in a kloof that was sheltered on three sides, they hastily clambered up the rocks to occupy the most suitable spot for resisting the attack.

At the highest point a caprice of nature had formed a little plateau surrounded by a lofty breastwork of rock, and here Van der Nath took up his position in order to command the widest possible outlook. He saw his men dragging up large stones to serve as cover from the enemy's fire, and he nodded approvingly. It was unnecessary for him to give them orders or advice ; they knew just as much as he, and he ridiculed the species of valour that bade every man defy death by exposing his breast to danger. Their instinct told them what they had to do ; to them it was folly to expose as much as the heel of their boot or the top of their hat. Had their tactics been other than they were they would all have been killed long before. Modern warfare has developed in such a fashion that a reversion to the ambush of the primitive savage has become natural. Strategy is much more valuable than courage ; to take one's enemy unprepared or from behind is now the thing to be striven for. Surprise is the last and most effective development of tactics.

The bravery that consists in advancing full front upon the enemy is henceforth utterly to be condemned ; it but serves to show the incapacity of the commander, and his

enslavement to the ideas acquired in the manœuvres of the parade-ground. The only courage which has, or ever will have, any practical value in war is the courage that shows itself able coolly and calmly to annihilate other human beings. The butcher boy who daily cuts the throats of fifty sheep is the soldier's ideal ; to rise to a machine-like indifference to the sufferings of others is the great goal to which the military man must strive if he is to fulfil his calling worthily. If he does not possess this essential quality he will be merely a sham fighter, a travesty ; for we live in the cold, calculating epoch of utility, when everything is classified according to its true value, without regard to old prejudices, or to ornamental attributes, whether of attire or speech.

Such new lessons had been given and accepted in silent bitterness. The war had entered upon its last stage, and from a struggle between great armies and many small forces it had degenerated into a deliberate scheme for the extermination of a whole people. Mistakes were avenged upon the innocent ; farms were burned down, women and children were driven away, and the common rights of nations were trodden under foot. The combatants, the weaker of whom were entirely justified in defending their country,—for if anything can ennoble war and exclude from it the possibility of calculation it is surely the defence of one's country,—were launched upon this wrong path, firmly determined to follow it up to the end. And so the butcher boy's ideal was attained ; the war, as such, neared its perfection, becoming what a war always must become.

But the lessons taught by Christianity and civilisation were cast aside as utterly worthless. The evil instincts of a great nation were carefully developed ; both print and pencil were utilised for the purpose, and the consistency with which blunders were repeated over and over again served to heighten the bitterness that had been aroused. The whole world followed the duel with excitement, but no government saw in it anything but the lessons that might stand it in good stead in some future war. Lies about

armaments for the purpose of preserving peace whizzed through the air, and everywhere preparations for fresh trials of strength were initiated. And it was Governments that boasted of being Christian who led peoples that prided themselves on their culture further and further into the labyrinth of armaments.

Van der Nath lay on the top of the kopje and looked down upon the preparations of the enemy. The position was typical of the campaign. In spite of the superior numbers of the English their advance must mean a serious loss of men, how serious it rested with the colonel to decide. If he had happened to be a thinking man, a moment's reflection must have told him that several hundred lives was rather a high price to pay for a single success the results of which were doubtful. But like all the others, he proved to be governed by the heartless idea that a victory, however insignificant, cannot be purchased too dearly. And here victory was seen to be certain. While still at a distance the pursuers had noted the disorder that prevailed in the Boer force as it moved in a long line towards the mountains, leaving behind it, in order to escape, what looked like its provision and ammunition convoy in a state of inextricable confusion.

To surround the chain of mountains would occupy several days, and thus de Vlies had obtained the start he needed. Here, as everywhere, a multitude of great and small interests were involved ; they did not affect one fight only, but the entire war. The authorities, who had deceived themselves and a great nation, must first and foremost justify themselves and save themselves from censure. A victory would allay the feeling of depression in England, whose people had embarked upon the enterprise without knowing its real extent. Ministerial lies that could not be admitted, business undertakings, financial speculations, and a host of other things rendered a successful action necessary, especially in an age which had got to the stage of being able to make money out of anything. Of these things, however, the general thought least ; he thirsted

for distinction, in the shape of orders, advancement, the praise of the press—nay, he might even hope to gain the admiration of future generations. His imagination was excited; an endless perspective of glowing possibilities beckoned him on. Honour awaited him—the imperishable honour of the butcher, though it is designated quite otherwise officially. A certain envy of comrades who had been lucky in similar undertakings helped to incite him; he would rival them, and show himself to be an even greater patriot than they. And so, disregarding the concerned looks of some of his staff at the sight of the open plain, he decided upon the attack and sent forth his lieutenants.

The activity that was now perceptible on the plain beneath gave Van der Nath an intimation of what must soon take place. His own dispositions were already made, and he looked around to see what de Vlies was doing.

Half a mile east of the kopje the ground was no longer rough and stony, but formed another plain about a thousand yards wide, which stretched, smooth as a floor, right up to the mountains, lying between them and the position occupied by the Dornenburg men towards the high ridges on the west. About four hundred yards to the east of the kopje the narrow ravine ended through which the whole Boer force had retreated. The disordered crowd of fugitives had now worked their way out of it to a piece or flat ground where no further obstacles hindered their progress. The English guns had now ceased firing into the kloof; the nature of the ground entirely hid what took place, and not much was to be gained by firing at random. Moreover, every shot merely served to hasten the retreat, and that was far from their intention.

Turning to the north, Van der Nath saw how the Boer rearguard swang into the pass, while the long line of waggons worked their way in the same direction. On the opposite side the same unceasing haste was apparent. Evidently they did not mean to let their prey escape them, as had so often happened before. In the west the cavalry dashed forward, plainly with the intention of reaching the

hills and taking up a position protected by them. But de Vlies had foreseen such a movement, for numerous dark spots could be seen hurriedly flitting from rock to rock and making for the threatened point. There was nothing to fear ; the Boers would get there first, and the only result the English would obtain by their manœuvre was the withdrawal of a large force from the pass.

Fresh troops poured constantly over the heights to the south-west. Some detachments hurried after the cavalry, while others marched down upon the plain and made for the isolated kopje, having evidently selected it as a point of support in their attack upon the Boer centre.

The troops with which the Dornenburg men had exchanged shots earlier in the day were already marching along the plain, and now formed the English right wing. A thin firing line advanced carefully to the kloof, which they apparently expected to find occupied. As nothing was to be seen a company was formed and sent through it, while two squadrons of cavalry advanced slowly along the edge at the same rate as their comrades below. The artillery followed, seeking for a good spot from which to open fire.

Van der Nath saw that the two squadrons of cavalry must soon come within range of his men. He whistled to call their attention, and signed to them to make their way over to the east side of the kopje. They had all seen the advance, and they understood. Sheltered by the rocks they crept round, and concealed themselves among the uneven rises of the ground.

“Not before I fire !” he cried to the man nearest him, as he saw the men’s eagerness, and the order was passed on from one to the other. All was still among the rocks where the forty men lay hidden ; they communicated with each other only by signs and gestures. Their excitement increased at every step of the cavalry’s advance. But not a movement was allowed to betray what was awaiting them.

Some one touched Van der Nath’s arm lightly, and he turned his head angrily to rebuke the disturber. His heart beat quicker, and he had a difficulty in taking his eyes off

the cavalry as they slowly but surely drew nearer. It was old Jan van Gracht who had crept up to him and lain down beside him. The old fellow gave a friendly grin, set his spectacles straight over his nose, and said—

“Those snails”—he nodded towards the squadron which advanced without observing the least caution—“are a long way out of range yet. We have still a good half-hour. If we only had another hundred guns!” And he laughed drily, rubbing the flats of his hands together, by way of exemplifying the complete annihilation that would then have befallen the enemy.

Van der Nath smiled bitterly, but displayed neither surprise nor disgust at the other's glee.

“We will receive them as they deserve,” he answered. Then, remembering that he was a Christian, he added more gently, and as if to excuse himself: “‘What ye will not that others shall do unto you, do not unto them!’ it says in the Scriptures.”

“It says a good deal more than no one troubles about,” answered Jan drily. “Leave it all to those who claim to understand such things, Abraham. It is dangerous to believe more or better than others. It's a waste of time. I have thought much over this and other things as well, but we cannot alter anything, and when anyone strikes me I strike him back.”

Van der Nath sighed heavily. It was so.

“No, don't trouble yourself about it,” said old Jan; “let's think rather of what we've got to do.” He glanced over the plain, and his thoughts took a new turn. “Of course it is unchristian to shoot one's fellow-creatures,” he went on, “but these fellows are always shouting that they are more civilised than we are. So, if they may do it, why shouldn't we quietly do the same? They must take the responsibility, and if only they don't succeed too quickly I don't mind. And things *don't* go too quickly,” he added with a harsh laugh. “Have you noticed?”—

“What?” asked Van der Nath absently.

“Well, that all our old leaders are gone, killed or captured, and still we are not beaten yet? Ours is a

wonderful soil: new leaders grow up everywhere as soon as the old go under. But those," he said, pointing across the plain, "have let themselves in for a bad business; they fight only to get something which, even if they get it, will prove worthless in a few years."

As Van der Nath lay on his face behind a boulder, his finger on the trigger of his rifle ready to kill, strange thoughts stirred his mind. But he thrust them from him, for he was tired. What good could be done by trying to loosen knots that must be cut? How many had tried before him, and yet nothing had been changed by an atom! No, man seemed made to forget everything; the world was never to learn aright one of the lessons it had neglected.

"No; we must kill!" he said aloud, in answer to his own thoughts. "Both ourselves and others, if it must be so."

"Yes, yes," said old Jan; "but if we can only get off scot-free it won't be so bad. The rooneks don't trouble me. As soon as I can I will get out of this, and take myself off to the German colonies."

Van der Nath smiled at the old man. Again it was the human being that found expression in his words—self-interest, which alike maintained war and brought about peace, which set in motion the whole world. All made sacrifices, some with the secret reservation that they would gain as much as possible thereby, or at least escape with a whole skin. To reap the fruit of others' exertions was the one goal; and so, without a thought of the exorbitant interest that one generation must constantly pay for the reckless extravagances of its predecessors, the whole world shuffled on, accepting bills which it never meant to meet, leaving it to the future to redeem them, recking nothing of the imposture of the whole business, although the next day might bring it all to light.

Jan van Gracht hastily raised himself on his elbow, and exclaimed half aloud—

"Lie still, man, or . . .!"

Van der Nath awoke from his musings, and looked round to discover the cause of the old man's exclamation.

He soon found it. The missionary had got up on his knees, and was leaning half over the stone behind which he had been hidden.

“Kill, or be killed—it is not difficult to choose !” said Van der Nath. Then, angry at the thoughtlessness that threatened to disclose the Dornenburg men’s place of concealment, he shouted : “Lie down, Pastor Schmidt !”

The men nearest the missionary had already noticed his action, and had roughly forced him down on the ground again. The old man submitted quietly, casting a questioning look at Van der Nath, as if to ask what it meant.

“That fellow is always doing something to annoy us,” grumbled Jan ;—“what is he doing here ?”

“I brought him along with me.”

“I only wish there was some means of getting rid of him again,” said Jan. “He is good for nothing ; he can’t even fire a rifle. I say, Abraham, are you sure he won’t betray us to the rooneks ? I haven’t very much faith in him.” And with the prolixity of age old Jan proceeded to recount the reasons for his suspicion.

Long before, when he was younger and everything in the world seemed easy to him, Parson Schmidt had turned his back upon his fatherland to follow what he thought to be his calling. With the brightly burning torch of humanity raised high above his head he travelled far away to those who were sitting in darkness. He suffered many privations and lived through experiences that would have brought others to the ground ; but he possessed the invaluable faculty of seeing only that which he wished to see, and so he went steadfastly on his way. When his strength failed him he did not turn back ; he only stopped awhile to gather new strength, and then began again. He did not perceive that the years had begun to accumulate, that time was slipping away from him, and that he was growing old. He still felt himself a young man, whom some inward power urges onward on the trodden path, and he went on, to finish as he had begun.

On returning from his expeditions he found a haven among these simple people, who had become fossilised in

the formulas of the Old Testament. Neither his words nor his example had much effect upon his hearers, but they could not but admit the honesty of his purpose, and they respected him accordingly. In everything he saw only the best, and at the finish of his course he was more childlike than ever.

When the war broke out everything was turned upside down, and Pastor Schmidt scarcely understood anything of it all. When the men of the Dornenburg district set out he followed them, and they had nothing against it. He might be one man extra, they thought. He preached daily in the laager, and while the guns were crackling round about he proclaimed with all earnestness the message of love to mankind. The ideal world created by his goodness was so beautiful that not even the bitterest reality could shatter it. He saw only the castle in the air which he had conjured up, and invited all to take their place in it. For he knew that he built upon the words of the Bible itself. Was not that a firm enough foundation?

But even for him there came an awakening, though he had striven long against it. He saw how the men were brutalised by the war, how savage they became under its influence; yet he sought only excuses for them. Not even when that which he held most sacred was violated and trodden under foot did he entirely realise what was taking place. He saw chiefly a personal application, and while the fate of men was being sealed he humbly thanked the Giver of all good that he should be found worthy to act as His servant. And so it chanced at length that in the Dornenburg field-cornet he found one man who first listened to his words and afterwards obeyed them.

This victory was so great that he was encouraged to greater exertions. He turned to Van der Nath's successor in the command, so little did the old visionary know the men he was among. Inspired by the greatness of his subject, he talked to Jan van Gracht for four hours on end. But old Jan only answered him surlily—

“Why don't you go to the rooneks, pastor? Everybody knows they are more civilised and educated than we poor

peasants. Speak to them first ; I should like to know what they would say to all that. And if they will stop, I won't go on an hour longer."

On old Jan's part this was only cruel mockery, but Pastor Schmidt took it quite otherwise. In his eyes this now became a new and greater mission ; it opened up a glorious vista before his joyful eyes. Yes, there they would understand him ; among educated officers and Christian soldiers it would be easy to win converts. And with a happy face the old man took his torn Bible, clambered on his shaggy little pony, and rode off, quite persuaded that his enterprise would be successful. His faith was so pure, his mind so childlike, that he heartily thanked Jan van Gracht for having given him the advice.

At last the missionary was gone, and no one missed him. But a few days later, just at the time of the wild flight of the Boer force, he had arrived once more upon the scene. Pale as death, a lanky spectral figure, he came riding on his pony, with his Bible still under his arm, his eyes staring in wonder at everything.

"You were foolish to leave us, pastor," said Jan van Gracht when he saw the old man arrive.

The missionary looked at him as though he did not recognise him.

"They laughed at me !" he muttered.

"H'mph !" coughed Jan.

"They thought I was mad !"

"Well, I don't think so. But now I must tell you one thing, pastor : it is still more foolish of you to come back. The rooneks have plenty of money, wherever they get it from ; they are not particular about a few pounds if it will help them to get wind of us. You understand ?"

"They laughed at me," complained the old man. He neither heard nor understood Jan van Gracht ; he seemed to be unconscious of everything about him. And so this spectre, who had come into the world twenty centuries before or after his time, rode on among the troopers, as oblivious of their presence as the new-born babe in the cradle. Bent beneath the recollection of the scornful

laughter that had awakened him from his illusions and crushed them, overwhelmed at having seen Him who died upon the Cross debased to the level of a caricature, he swayed about like a broken reed wherever the wind blew him. Now that he had lost belief in mankind, everything was indifferent to him ; broken and crushed, he crept about like a snail in its shell. But sometimes he awoke from his stupor, and then he would raise his Bible high in the air and say—

“They only laughed !”

He never said anything about how he had been received and turned away—as to whether any attempt had been made to keep him, or whether he had got away and come back of his own free will. All his thoughts were occupied with the one thing which he could not get over. What he said was all he knew—

“They only laughed !”

Jan van Gracht had told the story of the old man’s sad mistake in his own way, adding on his own account—

“He must be mad if he imagines that soldiers can care a jot about what is in the Bible, or else he is too cunning by half. Anyhow, I should be glad if he was away from here ; I don’t know what to make of him. By the bye, Abraham, you know, of course, that du Wallon is dead? . . . Don’t trouble to look so anxiously after the rooneks ; it will be ten minutes yet before they are within range of our guns.—Yes, du Wallon is dead and buried. I saw a shell explode and tear one of his legs off. We were obliged to retire immediately, leaving him to his fate. I heard from a man who was taken prisoner then and got away later how he behaved when the rooneks came up. He apologised for being unable to take off his hat to them, and for his not very presentable appearance. Then he talked of all sorts of things with a couple of English officers, but when they sent a clergyman to him, so that his soul might leave his body in a Christian manner, he bade him see instead to a poor soldier who had got a bullet through his lungs and lay struggling for breath. But when the soldier heard that it was all up with him, he told the

clergyman with a curse to go where he came from. Then du Wallon went on to say that war was a great teacher, and before he got away the clergyman got very irritated. The officers wanted to send du Wallon a doctor, but he was of opinion that it wasn't worth the trouble. He had examined himself, and knew that all was over with him. 'I have studied anatomy a little, gentlemen,' he said, 'although I never could have believed that I should have occasion to exercise my knowledge on myself.' Yes, it was all over with him, and in another hour he was dead. And his last words to those about him were: 'Now I raise my hat, gentlemen — long live the Free State!' And so died a brave fellow."

Old Jan shook his head sadly. But immediately he nudged Van der Nath with his elbow.

"Look out!" he whispered.

The two squadrons were now so near that the men lying among the rocks could distinguish their uniform, and saw that they were hussars. The horsemen had slackened their pace, and suddenly an officer raised his sword as a sign for them to halt. The Dornenburg men exchanged anxious looks, asking themselves if they were discovered. But again the cavalry moved on.

"Six hundred yards!" commanded Van der Nath in a low tone.

The men understood, and sighted their rifles accordingly. In a few moments the hussars would be within range.

But before they got so far, a new movement began. The squadron nearest the kopje turned to the right about, so that they now had their backs to the Dornenburg men. Suddenly a ringing cheer came from two hundred throats, and they dashed off at a gallop towards the east, across the steep slope, down into the ravine, and disappeared as if swallowed by the earth.

This passed so quickly that the men who lay in ambush had not time even to think of firing until the enemy had got clear away. The hussars had not sought cover from their fire, and there was nothing to show that they had been discovered. The English movement had evidently

been made in order to attack some force that was still down in the hollow. The Dornenburg men grew uneasy, and left their cover to discuss with each other what might be taking place. They had not long to wait for an explanation. The crackle of a lively rifle fire came from two different quarters, and the cheers of the hussars became louder.

“The rearguard!” said Jan van Gracht shortly.

“Yes, of course!” answered Van der Nath, remembering that he had not yet seen the hundred men left behind by de Vlies retire across the plain. What in the name of goodness had they to do down there? For some reason or other the little force had been delayed and overtaken. Perhaps they had stayed behind to sacrifice themselves in order that the fugitives should not be caught up. Perhaps they had found it impossible to conceal themselves in the ravine and inflict injury upon the enemy from an ambush. To the men on the kopje it was impossible to judge the position. At all events the little rearguard had been discovered, and was exposed to the fire of both infantry and cavalry, and their inferiority in numbers made the result a foregone conclusion.

The noise increased ; the firing grew louder and louder ; a cloud of dust rose high above the hills. The cloud rolled towards the north, indicating the direction in which the hussars advanced. At length the firing on one side ceased ; evidently the English infantry away down in the ravine had been obliged to stop so as not to shoot their own comrades who now rode between them and the enemy. The Boer fire also grew fainter, and at last stopped altogether.

It was now easy for the men on the kopje to guess what had happened. Their own countrymen were in headlong flight, and the hussars were in pursuit.

Five long minutes passed, and then a few Boer troopers appeared on the plain behind. Bending low over their horses' heads they spurred like madmen. They were followed by others, and soon there was a mingled mass of horsemen in broad-brimmed hats and hussars whose swords

constantly rose and fell. The swords flashed in the sunshine, revolvers and rifles cracked, and the combatants were enveloped by the dust in a veil, now transparent, allowing certain scenes clearly to be seen, now impenetrable, concealing everything from the eye and leaving the imagination free play. To have fired into such a turmoil would have harmed their friends as much as their foes ; not even the surest shot among the Dornenburg men would have risked it.

Probably by reason of the nature of the ground, the wild chase turned towards the north-east. The right flank of the Boer troop was thus the most hardly pressed, and was completely scattered, but the left wing and part of the centre managed to keep in something like order. While half a hundred men were either cut or ridden down, some forty succeeded in retiring to the west and in getting out of range.

The fight took place within three hundred yards of Van der Nath and his men ; they were able to observe all its unfortunate incidents, without being able to come to the aid of their friends in any way.

Directly the combatants separated, a couple of field-guns opened a sharp fire from the entrance of the ravine, showering their shell over the English, who waited defiantly for a moment, and then, when the guns from the kopje began to join in, emptying several saddles, they withdrew in a great curve to the east and got out of range.

Of the wounded left on the little battlefield, those who had strength enough crept either towards the ravine or the mountain. And now the onlookers witnessed a strange scene. Those who had been doing their utmost to take each other's lives seemed to have forgotten all their enmity. A hussar gave a Boer a drink from his flask, and left him with an encouraging nod ; while, at another point, a Boer trooper helped an antagonist to rise, and gave him his rifle to support him. But all did not behave in this fashion, nor was it to be expected of men who had so long been incited systematically against each other. A young officer, whose fury had risen to madness, shot in cold blood a

wounded man who happened to be beside him ; but just as he was threatening another he, in his turn, was felled to the ground from behind with the butt-end of a rifle. The hussar who had shared the contents of his flask with the Boer turned to help his superior officer, and another couple of dismounted troopers seemed about to back him up. For a moment the fight threatened to break out anew. But as they were within three hundred yards of the kopje, all soon realised the madness of it. They allowed their ardour to cool, and the hussars, crawling or running, hurried off, thankful that nothing hindered them.

The prologue to the drama was ended, and it left behind a mass of dead and dying horses, whose groans filled the air, while the hideous sight of mangled human remains was not wanting.

The forty Boers who had been separated from their comrades had ridden to the north-west, and now found themselves about half a mile from the kopje, but a mile and a half from the mountain which they had intended reaching. Their connection with the main body was already cut off by the advance of the English cavalry, who were now nearer the mountain than they. After a few minutes' hesitation they turned and, making for the kopje, joined the Dornenburg men.

The cavalry regiment still continued its advance, but as it had to withstand a fire from the mountains, the kopje, and the guns in the pass, the squadron closed up and retired in order.

Van der Nath distributed the welcome reinforcements among the boulders, and awaited the continuation of the fight. Although no notice had been taken of him, his position had been disclosed, and it was probable that the enemy would not undertake any more serious action until they had dislodged the kopje's defenders or forced them to surrender. As he surveyed the field, Van der Nath recognised what a sharp eye de Vlies possessed in deciding to hold just that position with a handful of men. To sacrifice them was not unprofitable, so long as the enemy's attention could be diverted from de Vlies's force. And

everything indicated that the English would ascribe the utmost importance to the kopje.

A battery and two machine-guns were placed in position about two thousand yards off, and a regiment of mounted infantry drew up just out of rifle range and prepared for the attack. Away down in the ravine the infantry were silenced by the Boer shells from the pass, and the kopje was safeguarded from attack on that side. But farther east an attack against the mountains was being prepared, while to the west large numbers of English were massed along the ridge. It was evidently the general's intention to press the Boers at every point with feigned attacks while the kopje was being stormed. At length the artillery were ordered to open fire and the infantry to advance.

The first shell from the battery came through the air with a sharp piercing whistle ; there were a few moments' breathless excitement, and the projectile exploded far beyond its goal. The next fell a few paces in front of Van der Nath's force, and it was followed by a whole shower of others. Pleased that they had succeeded in getting the right range so soon, the gunners now worked mechanically and without undue excitement.

To give his men something to occupy them, Van der Nath ordered them to exchange shots with the infantry, who had advanced rapidly, and were now ranged in long firing-lines less than a thousand yards away. To be exposed to shell fire without a chance of retaliation is enough to test the strongest nerves ; but the incessant crackle of their own rifles prevented them from heeding the flight of the deadly projectiles which fell nearer and nearer to them every minute.

At length, what they had expected happened ; a shell landed on the eastern side of the kopje. The stones were shattered and hurled in all directions ; the ground was torn up ; sand and pebbles flew around ; and a cloud of fine dust mingled with the suffocating smoke. As the men lay there, with beating pulses and parched throats, they heard a faint "Hurrah!" So their enemies over there were jubilating over their success — scoffing at them ! Their

hatred flamed up afresh, and they ground their teeth ; they quickened their fire, and when they saw a couple of the infantry fall, it was their turn to answer with a defiant cheer.

Evening was approaching, and the darkness would enable de Vlies to get well away. The English soldiers were anxious to fight ; they saw the purpose of the kopje's defenders—to delay them, and so gain time ; and if they were successful it would only mean beginning everything over again—beginning and never finishing. Officers and men saw what was at stake, and the order for a further advance was hardly uttered before the infantry were storming towards the hill.

Out of breath and wet through with perspiration, the men dashed over the ground to within eight hundred yards of the kopje and again opened fire. Another loud cheer burst from them as three shells exploded among the boulders, breaking down a long stretch of the breastwork and blowing in pieces five men. A few wounded men began clambering farther up the slope in order to escape the shower of projectiles which shattered even the stones, but there the bullets reached them, and they fell one after another.

To face such a deadly fire was impossible, and there was nothing for it but to conceal themselves on the north side of the hill. Van der Nath signed to his men to withdraw as well as they could, and crawling on all-fours through the recesses they dragged themselves away. Many were already wounded, and the removal to a more sheltered position cost three men their lives.

In five minutes the number of the kopje's defenders was reduced to sixty, but not one of them thought of yielding. All knew how much depended upon their resistance, and when they had gathered at a more sheltered spot they again opened a steady fire upon the English troops upon the plain. A wild, insane stupor possessed them, and they performed acts for which they could never have accounted. The smell of blood, of their singed woollen clothes, and of the powder, irritated their noses ; their brains wrought with

dizzy rapidity ; fever raced through their veins. When they saw how the enemy gained upon them they laughed with the scorn of madness.

One old man uttered the Lord's Prayer aloud as he discharged shot after shot. Suddenly he got up, regardless of the danger, and continued firing. With a report that made the men's ear-drums tremble, a shell burst three yards away, enveloping everything in its thick smoke. When it cleared away the old man's body lay stretched upon the stones, and some twenty paces off an unrecognisable object rolled over the edge of the kopje. It was his head, which had been rent from his body. A young lad, who saw it, sprang up and clenched his fists at the enemy, breaking into a storm of abusive words which not even his nearest neighbours could hear. Next moment another explosion overwhelmed him also, and he fell, a bleeding mass, at the feet of the missionary.

"What is this ?" exclaimed the old man in a tone of anguish.

"War !" shouted Van der Nath, who had guessed his question without hearing it. "War ! Do you hear—you who persist in talking of brotherly love upon an earth like this ?"

The old man did not hear. With a disturbed expression in his eyes, he took out his Bible and began to read aloud, as if he imagined that a human voice could drown the awful din.

Although the rays of the afternoon sun fell obliquely, the heat was still very oppressive. The men, who had had nothing to eat since morning, suffered the pangs of hunger, and their throats were parched with thirst. But although their sufferings were terrible, they were not to be compared with those of the wounded. One young man knocked his head repeatedly against the sharp corner of a stone to deaden his agony. Another, who had been shot through the neck, threw himself over a steep precipice ; the last that was heard of him was an insane laugh that pierced the din like the hoarse scream of a bird. A man, who had both legs shattered, buried his teeth in his bare arm, and bit out

a great piece of flesh to drink his own blood and appease his thirst.

Exasperated by the stubborn resistance, the infantry had approached about a hundred yards nearer. They still maintained an incessant fire, and the artillery, encouraged by their example, redoubled their exertions. The fire of the Boers had begun to slacken, a sign that their resistance was being weakened.

All at once, as Van der Nath lay firing, he saw a small white flag waving away down on the plain, while at the same moment the artillery and rifle fire ceased. He at once ordered his men to cease fire also, and the stillness that followed was for a time startling.

"Abraham, you are not thinking of surrendering?" asked Jan van Gracht anxiously.

"No; but de Vlies needs time. Let them waste half an hour on negotiations.—What do you want, pastor?"

The sudden calm had awakened the old missionary from his lethargy; he seemed to remember the rôle he had played at Koopman's Kraal. With his handkerchief in his hand he approached Van der Nath. He formed a strange contrast to the grimy, blood-stained men who were gathered round their leader, and when he saw their dark looks and heard their scornful words the tears started to his eyes.

"Surrender!" he exclaimed eagerly, stretching out his hands.

"Oh, indeed!" said Jan van Gracht resentfully; "there's time enough for that!" And he, who was generally imperturbably calm, suddenly broke out into an unreasonable fit of temper. "What do you want here?" he shouted; "you cursed bird of ill omen! What did the rooneks say when you went to convert them? Surrender? Nonsense! How do you think it would go with our friends over there? Be off, I say; be off—or better, take a gun and shoot!"

"God in heaven!" stammered the troubled missionary, pushing away the rifle that Jan tried to place in his hand.

"Yes, He is up there, no doubt, but not down here," answered Jan hastily; "otherwise people might trouble

themselves more about Him, which they do not do as it is. You, and I, and everybody knows it. That I should have had to live seventy years to learn it ! That I . . . no, it is no use." He stopped as suddenly as he began. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he sat himself down on the ground and began cleaning his rifle.

A bugle sounded from the plain, and the men saw an officer approaching with a bugler carrying a white flag.

"Don't let them come near enough to see how few we are," said Jan to Van der Nath.

Van der Nath clambered down and made for the southern side, where he waited until the bearer of the flag of truce had come within twenty paces. Then he stopped him, asking roughly what he wanted.

The officer tightened his reins, and promptly summoned them to surrender.

Van der Nath, whose one object was to gain time, made as if he wished to think over the matter, and when the officer showed signs of impatience, he answered that he must first consult his commandant.

"How long will it take?"

"Well," said Van der Nath, pondering, "a couple of hours, I should think,—perhaps three."

The officer, who had carefully noted the enemy's position and seen the terrible mischief done by the shells, shrugged his shoulders. To ask such a delay was mere insolence. He began to suspect that his superior had made a blunder in stopping the attack on his own responsibility.

"I shall communicate your answer to my colonel; for my part, I hope he will pay no attention to it," he said coldly, and turned back again with the bugler, after noting with pleasure—it was his duty to regard it so—a little stream of blood that trickled down between the stones, and a number of wounded men writhing in their death agony.

Van der Nath saw him disappear, and climbed slowly to his place again.

"Half an hour, that's all!" he said. "We can hold out that much if they don't storm us. That will make three hours in all."

Astonished at seeing the attack discontinued, the general in command sent the colonel a sharp message which, although mitigated in the transmission, gave him clearly to understand the unpardonable nature of his mistake.

It was only to spare his own men that he had summoned the Boers to surrender, and he was furious for allowing feelings of humanity to lead him astray.

“How many are there of them, do you think?” he asked the bearer of the flag of truce, who had just returned with the Boer answer.

“A hundred at most.”

The colonel resolved to spare neither his own men nor others, and to incur no further rebukes he at once despatched an order to the artillery to resume firing, while his own force advanced.

All the time the cannon had thundered from the ridges in the west, and now the battery before the kopje had approached seven or eight hundred yards nearer.

The fifty men still left to Van der Nath, seeing the manifestation of strength down on the plain, had had time to reflect, and for the first time that day they wavered. The half-hour through which they had just passed had been a terrible strain to them; only men whom desperation had brought to the borders of insanity could have withstood such a cannonade. The guns came still nearer; the last stage of the fight approached. The intense excitement of the men had begun to cool. One man crept backwards with the intention of running away; he was followed at once by two others, and at last five or six men left their posts, while those who were left looked alternately at them and at the enemy. Silently and shamefacedly, they too crept down the slope.

Seeing their intention, Van der Nath hurried after them. Pale with rage, he seized the nearest man by the arm and cursed him to his face. The man tore himself loose, and went on without daring to meet his look. Van der Nath felt his heart grow cold; everything grew dark before his eyes, and he had to lean for support against a rock. This, then, was to be the end—an ignominious flight, which

would enable the enemy to get close up on the retiring columns ! He would speak to them—implore them—threaten them—show them the shame of abandoning such an important position. But only a hoarse whisper came from his parched lips. With bloodshot eyes, he stretched out his hands to them beseechingly. Seeing his terrible despair, the men stopped, ashamed. Then the characteristic Boer caution asserted itself.

“It’s no use, cornet !” said one man in a low voice.

“We are too few,” added another. And he went on a few paces.

Van der Nath’s brain was in a whirl. He groped for support, and as he stood there, ragged and black with gunpowder, a strange thing happened. He saw, as in a vision, Simeon Flick’s boyish form standing on the heap of stones in the wilderness, and heard his sharp voice in the darkness of the night. What had often happened to others of his countrymen happened to him. The excitement of the moment, his anguish, his longing for death, and much else that was beyond his comprehension, seemed unitedly to exercise a strange influence upon him, causing him—like old Jan a little while before—to talk with a vehemence that made him breathless. He scarcely knew what he said ; the sound of his voice reached his ears, but he did not recognise it. It was as if another being spoke.

The men heard his altered voice, and saw his staring eyes that beheld nothing, and they were seized with that awe with which they had been accustomed to regard the elders of the community from their childhood. One after another, they turned back and gathered round him.

“Friends and comrades, hear me !” he shouted in a sort of ecstasy. “Do not think of the noise of battle and the blood that must be shed. No ; think rather of your fatherland, whose right of existence you cannot buy too dearly. We may spill our blood out on these rocks ; but what does it signify where we fall, if only ten men of our race are free ? Friends—comrades ! the Philistines are come with horses and waggons to tread down our

fields, to burn our houses, to slay us all. The anger of the Lord is upon us ; the guns of the enemy sound like the thunder of heaven ; His warcry resounds ; His eyes glisten with wrath and hatred ; our lives must be sacrificed. To-day or to-morrow—what matter ? When our hour is come nothing more can happen to us on this earth. But those there among the mountains must be saved, and it is we who must save them. We must sacrifice ourselves and others. We must kill—and be killed ! ”

At these words the old missionary approached. With his Bible raised high in the air he cried—

“ Not so ! Not death—not the shedding of blood ! Here it stands written for all ages”—he swang the book above his head—“ ‘ Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself ! ’ This is His greatest message ; Christ Himself has said it.”

“ Yes, He said it,” retorted Van der Nath, “ and therefore they crucified Him then, and deny Him now ! What—do they not do so ? Look over there, and see how the evening sun glistens on those long rows of guns, on the swords, on the points of the lances. Those men have not come to love their neighbours as themselves, but to kill them. Their clergy have pronounced God’s blessing on their undertaking ; the preachers have called down the favour of the Most High upon their arms. ‘ Go forth and kill ! ’ they have said. That is the highest of all commands. Those whose business it is to preach the gospel of love have made Abel the criminal and Cain the great hero, who with bloodstained hands snatches the praise and admiration of the world for himself. Come, friends ; let us exalt Cain ! let us be like him in everything ! What ! is there anyone who hesitates ? Up ! up ! Shoot, smite, and kill ! It is their priests who have taught us. It is not we who have chosen ; it is those down there on the plain—the men and women of their nation—of all nations. Like them, all humanity shouts : Crucify ! crucify ! Up, then ; kill and die ! ”

It was not so much his words as the tone of his voice that caused the men to follow him back. Their former

intoxication returned, and made them blind to the madness of continuing their defence. All except one man took their places at the top of the kopje. Van der Nath saw him climbing down the slope, and ran after him. There were tears in the man's eyes.

When Van der Nath urged him to come back he stood perplexed, and said in a low tone—

“My daughter is over there.”

“Then give your life for hers! Perhaps the Lord will accept your sacrifice and spare her. Perhaps He will show mercy to an innocent child who has done no evil. But mankind shows no mercy.”

The man cast a long, lingering look towards the north. Then he began climbing up the slope again.

Van der Vath had never seen him before, and did not know his name. But he embraced him, kissing his bearded cheek.

“Give . . . give . . . never tire of giving!” he said, as they returned hand in hand together to die at their posts.

A great roar came from the plain. The firing-line had been reinforced and spread out to strengthen the attack. Then the big guns opened fire anew.

Van der Nath sprang up to the highest point of the rocks, and tearing off his coat, bared his breast and, without any protection, turned towards the enemy. The firing was now so rapid that the separate shots could not be distinguished, but formed one continuous roar. His breast heaved heavily and his brain seemed insensible; he clenched his fists and stretched them in menace towards the foe, as if to emphasise the curse he would have uttered. But his breath failed him; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and everything appeared to him through a mist. He heard the crash and the whizz of the shells, but for him the sounds had now no meaning. He was no longer himself. Just then old Jan touched him on the knees with his rifle, and dragged him down.

“Be calm, Abraham; be calm!” he shouted in his ears.

It took him some moments to collect his thoughts sufficiently to know where he was. His pulse was beating

at fever height, his brain was awhirl, and the sweat ran down his back.

Jan saw that he wished to speak, and placed his ear close to his mouth.

"Have I been out of my mind?" asked Van der Nath anxiously.

"Oh no," answered Jan drily; "such a thing might happen to anyone; I have seen it often before—in others. Now, then, shoot, Abraham! That's the only thing to do—keep busy at it. Do you see that fellow on his knees?—yes, that one! I have shot at him twice; try your luck, and let's see!"

Realising that activity was necessary to retain the balance of one's mind in that diabolical din, he recovered his self-possession sufficiently to begin firing slowly and methodically, as if it were a target practice, while concentrating his thoughts on the one end worthy of a good soldier—to destroy, to kill.

"The deuce!" muttered old Jan. "You've hit that fellow at last! I began to think he was bullet-proof."

A shell burst near them with a deafening crash. The splinters flew about, and groans of agony announced that someone had been hit. Both turned round and saw the missionary lying stretched out on the ground, the blood streaming from a wound that extended from his waist to his shoulder. The whole of his right side had been torn open, and two crushed ribs protruded. The old man seemed stupefied rather than sensible of any pain. In spite of his terrible wound he strove to reach his much-loved Bible, which had fallen a few paces from him. Touched by his helplessness, his anxious supplicating looks, and the feebleness of his weak, fumbling hands, Van der Nath was about to creep towards him; but Jan, who let nothing escape him, restrained him, for now even the slightest movement was dangerous.

The man whom Van der Nath had persuaded to return fell as he was changing his place, shot through the temple. A shell that had been aimed with deadly accuracy tore asunder three living limbs, making a regular shower of blood and

shreds of flesh round about. The artillery concentrated their fire upon the summit of the kopje, and with terrible effect. In a very few minutes all was changed, and the number of the defenders was reduced to thirty. But although the position had become untenable—perhaps because of it—the fever of battle once more rose to fury. In their exalted state of mind, amid the death-cries and agonised wails of the wounded, the survivors forgot even their burning thirst. Every other feeling gave way before the desire to inflict as much injury as possible, and that state of exaltation which is called courage reached its utmost limits. Whenever a man fell dead or wounded the rest shouted in exasperation, vowing a terrible revenge.

A new danger threatened the thirty desperate men, who fired and cursed by turns. The machine-gun was advanced and placed so that it could rake the kopje from the west. It was sighted in a hand's turn, and was soon humming like a well-oiled sewing-machine. The masses of lead vomited forth by it, and by the big guns and the musketry, rent the rocks as if they had been of wood, filling the air with chips and splinters. It was certain death to expose oneself above the breastwork, but in their present state of mind the Boers were reckless, and the hope of sending a well-directed shot among the enemy was the undoing of many. One man's head was cut in two, as if by the most careful of operations; another man was hurled high in the air, and cast, dead, over the slope, ten paces from the spot where he had lain.

As he saw the blood flowing in streams and so much human suffering let loose, Van der Nath at last understood how very little the welfare of mankind really signifies. For a moment he shook himself free from his surroundings, and looked up to Heaven as if to ask a question. But he knew how useless it was to ask questions to which no answer is to be found. He smiled gloomily, and cast his eye over the scene. The evening sun gilded the mountain ridges to the west; the plain lay bathed in its soft light, while towards the east everything lay in a shadow which crept forward, heralding the night. All was the same as usual; the whole

world seemed fair and satiated with light. He sighed, and turned away.

"It's all a lie!" he said aloud.

He looked down upon the plain before him. There human beings, designed to be the highest of created things, were deliberately debasing themselves to the level of the lowest. He placed a fresh cartridge in his rifle and fired, muttering once more as he did so—

"Lies . . . all lies!"

The artillery redoubled their exertions, the machine-guns belched forth their lead with fury. Then for a moment or two the noise suddenly ceased, for it was necessary to adjust the fire so that it should do no harm to the storming party themselves. The infantry gave a last volley and, with a loud cheer from their seven hundred parched throats, they dashed up to the kopje which they meant to storm. Their bloody task was nearly finished.

As soon as the enemy's fire had ceased, the defenders got up from their uncomfortable positions. It was now their turn to take revenge, and as they had now no more, perhaps, than a couple of minutes before them, they set about making the best use of their time. Fifteen ragged, bleeding men, with wild eyes and heaving chests, lay at the highest point of the kopje, while two, who had been slightly wounded, knelt at a little distance, firing as fast as they could.

The English soldiers troubled themselves little about this last resistance. On they rushed, cheering hoarsely. They meant to do their work quickly . . . quickly. Their lives, indeed, depended upon the quickness of their feet. Here and there a man rolled down—another . . . two more . . . three! Forward!—sharp and quick! They fired as they ran, but there was no aiming properly. Forward!—quick!—quicker still!"

The fight had now reached the point where the senses yield to the animal desire to see blood flow, where even the instinct of self-preservation is silenced, where hatred gives the arm double strength and the brain an unnatural power for compassing destruction, where men's eyes shoot forth lightning and their mouths mumble words without meaning.

The khaki-clad soldiers had begun clambering up the kopje. Shots flew about above and below. Four Boers had fallen and double as many English.

“Surrender, you madman!” shouted the colonel, whose unfitness had already been proved by his humanity. “Surrender!”

Van der Nath answered with a bullet that stretched him on the ground.

Shots were exchanged at ten, at five paces—in each others' faces. The besiegers were up; they scaled the summit from three sides, and hurled themselves upon the nine desperate, blood-bespattered men, who stood awaiting them defiantly with their backs against the rocks.

Here the fight should have ended; but the excitement was too great, and no one ordered the nine men to surrender. Indeed, no one seemed to imagine such an alternative possible. There was now no time to shoot; the two sides rushed at each other, and it was now a hand-to-hand fight.

Wilhelm Zimmer, whose brain was in a ferment at the thought of the old lies about military honour and bravery which his father had never tired of telling him, sprang forward and smashed a man's skull with the butt-end of his rifle. Next moment he felt as if a red-hot iron had been thrust through his body. A soldier had driven his bayonet into his stomach, and pressed upon him with all his strength. Zimmer dropped his rifle and seized the bayonet with trembling hands. He looked at his antagonist, and met the completely soulless eyes of an automaton which does its work mechanically and without knowing what it is about. Of what was being enacted the man had not the smallest comprehension.

Zimmer fell backwards and struck his head against a sharp stone. His senses forsook him. With the same look the soldier set his foot upon the body and, without troubling himself about the dying man's convulsions, he wrenched out the bayonet in order to use it upon another.

Old Jan van Gracht had fired his last shot. He saw two soldiers spring towards him, and parried a bayonet-

thrust with his rifle. Immediately he was felled to the ground with the butt-end of a rifle. He tried to rise, but another blow came from above, smashing his spectacles and embedding some pieces of glass in his flesh, forcing out his left eye, and dislocating his jaw. The blood stained his white hair, streamed down his face, and dripped to the ground. He managed to rise to his knees, and tried to say, "I surrender!" but only a hoarse gurgling sound came from his throat. He was half frantic with pain from his jaw; his eye dangled by some shreds of nerves; and, a picture of utter wretchedness, he crept away a few paces, groaning with agony.

His antagonist was a tall, lithe young fellow. Again his rifle descended on the old man's head. Blind, and more dead than alive, old Jan crept on, imagining that he was uttering the words of delivery: "I surrender!" The soldier saw nothing and heard nothing; he only did what he had been told was his duty. Thrice he struck at Jan van Gracht's body. Then a comrade came up, and with a final blow released the old man from his sufferings.

The whole plateau was now like a madhouse, in which a number of human beings, driven by the same impulse, pressed each other in their eagerness to commit actions which might arouse horror in them at the moment, but which they would long afterwards look back upon with pride. From every side the soldiers rushed up, driving their opponents against the rocks and bayoneting them one after another.

Van der Nath used his rifle as a club, and so kept off those who attacked him. His stupor was now gone, and the carnage that went on about him filled him with disgust. At this moment it occurred to him that human beings who claim to possess morals and feelings ought assuredly to have some other mission in life than slaughter. But the groans of his friends, and the sight of old Jan lying dead a few paces away, gave his mind a fresh revulsion, and he rushed forward to obey the instinct which had now become the most natural—that of revenge.

Benjamin Flick was struck dead at his side; another man

unknown to him was shot by an officer who cold-bloodedly discharged his revolver into his breast. Another man was disarmed and dragged away cursing. One of the soldiers trod upon the old missionary, who writhed like a worm beneath his feet.

It was too much. Van der Nath's reason began to give way. . . . Then he remembered that he wanted to die. He felled a man, but next moment his rifle was in splinters, and only the barrel was left in his hands. But he went on fighting; although all his men were disarmed or dead, he struck about him like a madman. Half a dozen soldiers threw themselves upon him, forcing him down; but in their zeal they got in each others' way, and he got on his feet again, clutching blindly for some throat to strangle, some human flesh to dig his nails into. He uttered a hoarse shout; he struck out, bit and kicked. In the confusion he caught hold of a fresh weapon, and with it he dealt several powerful blows. Then a tall officer pressed forward, clutched him by the beard, and thrust and held him back.

For half a second they regarded each other. Van der Nath knew what must happen. He smiled, and a clear laugh expressive of freedom broke from his dry lips. He felt the mouth of the revolver pressed against his forehead.

“Sarah! . . . Isaac! . . . I am coming!”

The shot was fired, shattering his brains. He stretched out his arms and fell, never to rise again.

The officer fell back a pace, and placed his hand distractedly to his forehead. To his surprise he had seen neither hate nor fear in the dead man's last look, but rather a strange gratitude. This alone caused him to think of his act, which was otherwise so commonplace as to call for no notice. A certain scruple that bore an unpleasant resemblance to remorse troubled him.

“It was my duty,” he said, as if answering some unseen accuser.

The sun sank, the evening breeze swept gently over the plain, cooling the fevered brows of the victors. And now the tense state of excitement was succeeded by the inevitable reaction. Now that the fight was over, the soldiers

became human beings again, with more or less power to think and feel. The battalion that had had the honour of storming the kopje was composed of young and inexperienced men, not yet hardened to their work. One young fellow sobbed aloud at the sight of the mangled bodies and his own blood-bespattered feet. Another leaned for support against a boulder, utterly overcome, his forehead bathed in cold sweat. A third, who had distinguished himself in the action, silently repeated a half-forgotten prayer of his childhood, but with his back towards his comrades, so that he should not be laughed at for his unmanly weakness. One non-commissioned officer swore at the men for their weakness after the fight, but the officer who had shot the enemy's leader silenced him.

There was a movement to the south of the kopje, and on looking in that direction the soldiers saw that the general in command was coming to inspect the position in person. He was in no very good humour; he had convinced himself that the slaughter would prove as good as useless. It was evening, and darkness would soon cover the field. De Vlies would have, therefore, a whole night's start. He had got off once again, and, thanks to his well-known activity, and to the exhausted condition of the English troops, he would be able to continue his desperate resistance still longer.

Having ordered his staff officer to draw up the official report of the engagement, the general stroked his moustache and hurried up the rocky slope. At all events, he reflected, it was a victory, and he had annihilated the enemy's rear-guard. When the news of his achievement reached England the whole country would rejoice, and the admiration of a mighty nation would be his reward. He nodded in friendly fashion to the soldiers, who were drawn up in line as far as circumstances would permit, and climbed on until he reached a spot where he could view the scene without soiling his boots with blood.

A deafening cheer broke from the soldiers, and the general joined in like a schoolboy who has been given a holiday. Suddenly his foot slipped and he was nearly fall-

ing. A stone had got loosened and had rolled over. But he managed to keep his footing, and laughing reassuringly to an officer who ran to his support, took up his position on a four-cornered object that seemed to offer greater security to his portly figure. The general had now surmounted his former misgivings. The victory now appeared to him as great as a campaign won. He addressed some words of praise to the men nearest him, thanking them for the courage they had shown, for the readiness they had shown in sacrificing themselves for their country, for the manner in which they had stormed such a difficult position, and finally he gave the signal for yet another cheer.

The soldiers obeyed. Their jubilation rose to heaven and died away again. In the silence that supervened, the humming of a fly might have been heard. The men strained their necks in wonder and listened. From behind the general came the sound of a trembling voice, broken at intervals by gasps and sighs. It sounded as if it came from the other side of the grave, and as they heard it the men stood silent and motionless holding their breath.

“Our Father, which art in heaven . . .” said the feeble voice, and it continued, on through the prayer, until the final “Amen” came, like a sob from a suffering child.

The general stood there disconcerted ; the fine effect of the military scene was entirely spoiled by this vexatious interruption from a wounded man. He set his helmet on his head, and as the ambulance men advanced up the slope he signed to them to come and remove the disturber, who appeared to him, upon a closer scrutiny, to be a parson. The men who bore the sign of mercy, the red cross, upon their left arm, raised the old missionary and placed him on the litter. But as they were about to bear him away the old man protested with extraordinary energy, and pointed to something that lay at the general’s feet.

The general wondered at such stubbornness in a dying man, but he was of a kindly nature, incapable of wishing anyone any evil, especially an old man in such a condition. He besmeared his own hands in lifting from the ground the object of so much solicitude, upon which, indeed, he had

been standing for some minutes. He saw that it was a book, and was moved by curiosity to open it. The first glance at the old-fashioned letters showed it to be a Bible, the leaves of which were glued together with blood, while the cover was pierced with the splinter of a shell. The general closed the book hastily, and handed it to the ambulance man, who placed it upon the old man's breast. The dying man again made a sign; he raised his cold hands, and folded them over his beloved Bible. It seemed as if the grateful touch of the torn, bloodstained book had given him fresh strength, for he sat up, and called out aloud, as only those can cry who die in great spiritual distress—

“Father, forgive them—forgive them, for they know not what they do !”

THE END

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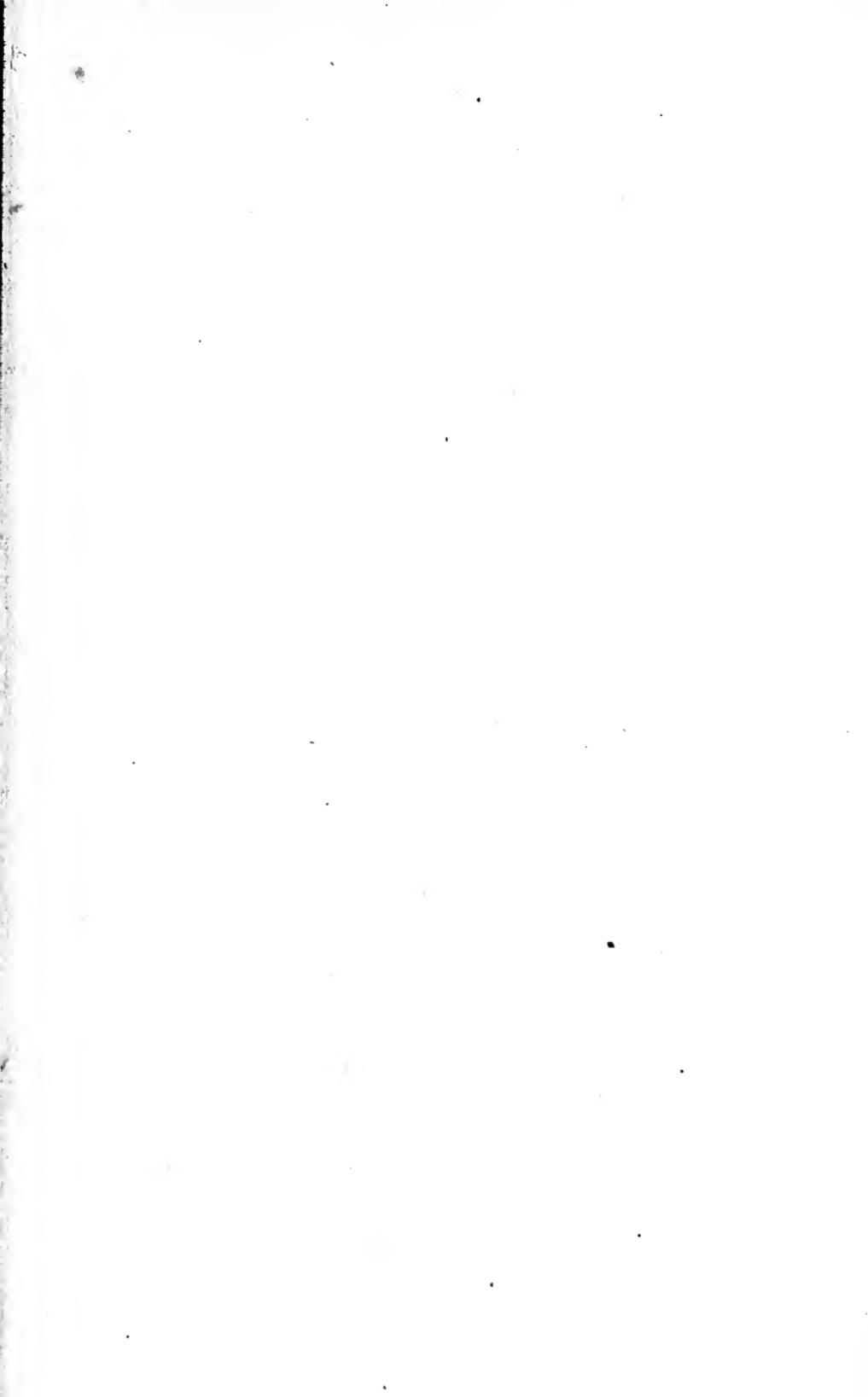
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